

In Review

Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies

By James Sanders

Alfred A. Knopf, 496 pp., \$45.00

Movies and the Metropolis

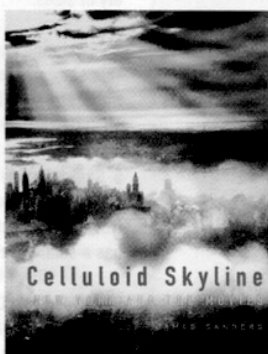
By Phillip Lopate

There are two New Yorks: the real one and the mythic city depicted in film.

Urbanism and film studies have long flirted with and hinted at marriage. The two fields have so much in common—so many mutual admirers—that it is tempting, if tricky, to fold one into the other as a single entity: cinemarchitecture. Until now, however, the merger has shown more promise than reality. But James Sanders, a Manhattan architect, has finally tied the knot with his thorough, smart, informative, entertaining, beautifully illustrated and designed coffee-table tome, *Celluloid Skyline*.

The book's premise is that New York, thanks to its photogenic, dramatic, and iconic qualities, has been used so often in films as photographed location or reconstruction that its on-screen existence adds up to a distinct "dream" or "mythic" city. In order to tell the history of that "movie city," which intersects with the real New York, the author has performed an act of analysis on the filmed metropolis by dissecting it into spatial elements: streets, public spaces (especially Central Park), and landmarks; building typologies (row house, tenement, skyscraper, penthouse, train station, nightclub); neighborhoods and specialized districts (the Lower East Side, Fifth Avenue, Harlem, the Great White Way); and so on.

The author also tells a clear historical narrative: how the early silent films regularly used images of New York, partly because the industry began there and partly because Americans were fascinated with the big town; how the relocation of the motion-picture industry to Southern California did nothing to diminish the public's appetite for New York stories, causing the



Hollywood studios to construct their own "New York streets" on back lots, which were used and reused with slight changes; how the end of World War II saw a return to location shooting in New York, with grittier, more neorealistic results, alongside the continuing production of an imaginary, artificial Gotham.

All this is laid out very cleanly. Sanders brings an architect's structural logic to what could have been an overwhelming muddle. His most inspired chapters may be those on

tions, and built them up again in a stylized manner.

Although the book generally hews to a chronological linearity, it doubles back to consider films that illustrate some element of the cityscape under discussion. Sanders is particularly adept at showing how a movie's particular look might result from a conjunction of historical factors, technological advances, industry pressures, and evolving aesthetic tastes. The author, who cowrote Ric Burns's PBS series *New York: A Documentary Film*, knows his local history cold. He is quick to explain, for example, how changes in zoning laws altered the skyline, which then created different opportunities and problems for cinematographers (in the remake of

King Kong, "the flat tops of the Twin Towers offer nothing to grab onto."). One of the best sections of the book revolves around Hollywood's ambivalent relationship with the tenement. On the one hand, "the tenement was not just a setting but a subject: the greatest scandal, and tragedy, of the modern city." On the other hand, the structure was photogenic and the crowded ghetto street had the pulse of life. In discussing the 1931 *Street Scene*, which took place on a single exterior set, Sanders writes: "There was an inherently 'theatrical' quality to the tenement front, not unlike that of its patrician predecessor, the row house. Like the row house (from which it had historically evolved), the tenement fronted the street squarely, met



A shot from the 1949 film version of *The Fountainhead*.

Hollywood's re-creation of New York, perhaps because the set designers did something akin to what the author himself has done—they broke down the city's streetscapes and interiors into component elements, with the aid of photo archives of real loca-

its neighbors shoulder-to-shoulder, and provided a continuous street-wall, thus shaping the street itself into the same kind of well-defined outdoor room. Like the row house, the tenement put special emphasis on its street facade, using much the same inventory of architectural devices: decorative treatment around the doors and **continued on page 136**