

# The building I wish I had designed

## William Van Alen's Chrysler Building

Soraya Khan, co-founder of Theis + Khan architects, is asked to pick a building she admires and would like to have created herself



New York skyline, 1930, showing the Chrysler Building, left, and the Chanin Building, both of which were completed that year. Photograph © Ralph Deakin/ RIBA Collections.

The construction story of the Chrysler Building in New York is a legend of masculine competition, a race to design the tallest building in the world in an era of post-war prosperity. Yet the true wonder is that, despite the macho posturing, architect William Van Alen and industrialist William P. Chrysler created a building of exquisite jewel-like beauty.

Women were granted the vote in 1920 in the United States and, alongside the unprecedented post-war boom in industrialisation and urbanisation, a decade of irresistible style, confidence and extravagance was unleashed in the forms of Art Deco and Jazz music. At the same time, new mass-production techniques propelled industrialists like Chrysler, who founded his automotive company the Chrysler Corporation in 1925, to new heights of wealth and ambition.

Chrysler wished to create a building that would reinvigorate the area around Manhattan's East 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue and embody the Chrysler Corporation's success. Because Chrysler was financing the project and money was no object, it also had to be the tallest building in the world.

Their rivals for the title, however, were working in parallel. Banker and developer George Ohrstrom and Van Alen's former architect partner H. Craig Severance, working with architects Shreve and Lamb, were racing to complete their contender at



Above The lobby inside the main entrance. Photograph, 2010, © James Maher Photography.



Right Winged urn echoing the 1929 Plymouth automobile's radiator caps. Photograph, 2006, © Danielle Tinero/ RIBA Collections.



Lexington Avenue entrance. Photograph, 2010, © James Maher Photography.

40 Wall Street, known as the Bank of Manhattan Trust building.

Van Alen's brief for the brick-clad, steel-framed Chrysler Building included a private office suite and apartment for Chrysler at the top, with the private Cloud Club occupying the 66th to the 68th floors. The tower rises 77 storeys, culminating in a tapered crown supporting a spire or 'vertex'. The ribbed stainless-steel cladding on the crown is beautifully detailed. Each of the four elevations is set on a radiant pattern of seven parabolic curves that narrow towards the apex with triangular windows, creating a sunburst crown both exotic and beautifully proportioned.

Chrysler instructed Van Alen to incorporate elements from his cars on to the façades. These included huge chrome-nickel steel eagles, two at each of the shaft's main corners at 61st-floor level, which are replicas of the 1929 Chrysler car mascots. At the lower 31st-floor setback, ornaments resembling winged urns echo the 1929 Plymouth automobile's radiator caps.

As a standard for office-lobby interiors, the Chrysler's is sublime. The large ground-floor lobby's ceiling has a mural painted by Edward Turnbull called *Energy, Result, Workmanship and Transportation* that depicts scenes of the workers who created the building together with tributes to the new Age of Flight. The walls and floor are dressed in voluptuous

stones, red Moroccan marble, yellow Sienna marble and amber onyx with a blue marble trim. The elevator doors and cabs are clad in exotic hardwood marquetry. The lighting is theatrical and moody, exuding a glamorous low-level golden glow.

By the end of May 1930, 40 Wall Street had held the record for the tallest building for just one month. The Chrysler Building surpassed this in the most theatrical and spectacular fashion. The spire, 185 feet in height, was secretly assembled within the crown and then hoisted into place in a remarkable 90 minutes. It surprised their rivals, taking the Chrysler from its original intended height of 925 feet to a triumphant record of 1,046 feet.

Unfortunately the relationship between client and architect broke down at the end of the project. Van Alen was forced to sue Chrysler for unpaid fees and, although he won the lawsuit, the damage to his reputation was irreparable. This, together with the arrival of the Great Depression, led him to abandon architecture and teach sculpture.

It makes absolute sense to me that Van Alen was an artist of the highest order and explained how a macho race to construct the world's tallest building culminated in a tower of such dazzling beauty. Like Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Chrysler Building embodies the style and optimism of the Modern Age and I love them both.