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## GREATER NEW YORK

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

# The Newest Generation of Ogres



Have you seen Central Park's newest addition? It's a 90-story tower. To be fair, the structure—One57, consisting of 135 luxury condos atop the 210-room Park Hyatt Hotel—isn't actually within the perimeter of the park. It's just so tall that it feels that way. Its address is 157 W. 57th St., across the street from Carnegie Hall.

It probably wouldn't be right for an architecture critic to pass judgment on a building before it's completed. But I'm not an architecture critic. I'm just a very long-time park-goer. Indeed, I well remember other intrusions on the skyline. Such as the General Motors Building. Before it arrived, the Pierre, the Sherry-Netherland and the Savoy Plaza hotels stood at the southeast corner of the park like sisters. Then the GM came along, a playground bully, replacing the Savoy Plaza and throwing off the skyline's symmetry. It was ugly to boot, a tissue box stood on its side.

Disclaimer: I have nothing against progress, or tall buildings. Regarding progress, it occurred to me at some point—and this wasn't even after I'd been drinking with my friend

Aris on the benches opposite Tavern on the Green and in the shadow of the aforementioned structures, as we occasionally do in warm weather—that you can almost trace the rise of American greatness through the skyline of Manhattan, indeed even while seated in Central Park swigging from a spiked water bottle.

**'Most of the time in New York we get better than average, but not much.'**

The prewar elegance of buildings such as those along Fifth Avenue, Central Park South and Central Park West—the Essex House, the Century, the Majestic, the San Remo—were dwarfed, come the 1960s and beyond, by much more massive and generally not especially inspired projects that nonetheless seemed to symbolize the power and vitality of the American Century.

These included the Avon Building at 9 W. 57th St.; that claustrophobic thicket of towers in the Carnegie Hall vicinity (Metropolitan Tower, Carnegie

Hall Tower, CitySpire Center) whose views of the park, such as they were, One57 is currently in the process of obliterating; and the Time-Warner Center.

Now, we appear on the verge of a new steroidal era where—within a decade or two, if all goes well—those ogres will be eclipsed by even mightier ones. I'm told that a building soon to rise on 57th and Park, on the site of the Drake Hotel, may top out higher, significantly higher, than the 1,004-foot One57.

The last thing I'd want is for progress to stop, for the U.S. to throw in the towel and let the action shift to Asia, to the extent that it hasn't already. And as I stated, I have nothing against tall buildings. Indeed, our living room mantelpiece boasts miniatures of the Empire State and the Chrysler buildings, the World Trade Center, Chicago's Willis (formerly Sears) Tower and the Eiffel Tower.

Maybe it's only because I'm not yet used to it, or because it's still incomplete and will pleasantly surprise me, but One57's presence feels less like it helps frame the park than violates it, exploits it for its own mercenary purposes—one 13,000-plus-square-foot apartment was listed at \$115 million and has gone into contract for an undisclosed amount—while contributing little in return.

And by contributing, I mean throwing some interesting shapes or colors against the skyline. The 57th Street façade, with undulating glass panels, at least on the lower floors, show some potential. And the reflective glass starting to climb the façade that faces Central Park might help make the building dissolve into the skyline, which could be for the best. But the massing doesn't seem especially inspired. It's no Empire State—no missile struggling to break the bonds of Earth and cleave the heavens—but appears an undisguised attempt to maximize air rights and monopolize park views for plutocrats.

But again, I'm no architect and the building's Pritzker



An urban planner says the first question to ask about One57, above, is: 'Does it make sense in that location?'

Prize-winning architect, Christian de Portzamparc, may well make me eat my words. In the meantime, I decided to consult a couple of experts on the subject, both for the appearance of balance and to determine whether I might simply be hysterical and in need of a vacation.

Alexander Garvin, an urban planner, professor in the Yale School of Architecture and former member of the NYC Planning Commission, instructed me that the first question to ask is: "Does it make sense in that location? There are already a cluster of fairly tall buildings there."

He was referring, among others, to that Carnegie Hall-area triumvirate. But One57 already dwarfs them and it isn't even finished. I'll give it this, however: Because it sticks out, it seems to make everything else harmonize. Suddenly, the GM Building on one corner of the park, and the Time-Warner Center, on another, feel like self-effacing kin.

And what of One57's effect

on Central Park? "I'm forever bothered by the Hearst Building, which is shorter," Mr. Garvin confided, referring to the Hearst Tower, also on 57th Street, and its quirkily monotonous, triangular-patterned façade. He has a point.

I also contacted Carol Willis, the founder of the Skyscraper Museum in the Battery. "It's that idea of romance that's the definition of the skyscraper," she explained.

She distinguished structures that punctuate the skyline by virtue of their singular silhouettes—again, the Empire State and Chrysler buildings. Anything else is, well, as she put it simply and better than I could, "a tall building."

Mr. Garvin told me: "We occasionally get extraordinary towers like the Chrysler Building. Most of the time in New York we get better than average, but not much."

That's well and good if the thing is going to be buried among a forest of fellow high-rises in Midtown. But Central Park is the city's front lawn.

Ms. Willis made the point, and Mr. Garvin, too, that what makes New York's skyline unique isn't necessarily the size or shape of its particular elements, but the clustering of buildings, the wild grandeur, on this tiny island swatch of real estate. "The heterogeneity of the skyline, the diversity of forms," as Ms. Willis put it.

While other buildings that border the park—such as the art deco Majestic or the San Remo, which took full advantage of the zoning laws of its time—were of their era, Ms. Willis argues that One57 will probably be of its generation: the first, but hardly the last, of its scale at that location, eventually to harmonize with, perhaps even to be dwarfed by, other buildings come the next stage of the city's development. As unappealing as that prospect seems, the alternative would be worse.

"I hope it's never finished," Mr. Garvin said of the skyline. "When it is, we're done."

*ralph.gardner@wsj.com*