I
Meeting the World

ALL BUILDING is “necessarily an act against nature,” writes Joseph Rykwert. “When you choose a site you set it apart from nature.” Throughout history such encroachments, in their many gradations and varieties, have called forth gestures of propitiation—ceremonies designed to appease angry gods, encourage good luck, and capture hidden sources of power. In China, India, and Japan, as well as in Greece, Rome, and pre-Columbian America, the founding of cities and the planning of buildings were endowed with extravagant symbolic ambitions. Their location, their orientation to one another (as well as to the earth’s directions and natural landmarks), the position of walls and streets were inspired by myths, surrounded with rituals, and celebrated by monuments and anniversary festivals. In the Roman world towns were purified enclosures: planners might consult the flight of birds, the motion of clouds, or the movement of stray animals to determine their precise sites and moments of establishment. Holes were dug into the ground to hold good things or contain the earth transported by the settlers from elsewhere. Secret naming ceremonies were common; the cutting of the furrows to mark town boundaries would be undertaken with a white cow and an ox, yoked together. The whole population participated in these public events, producing a common experience that was reinforced and made retrievable by means of the created landscape order itself—the pattern of its streets and the shape of its walls.

The integrity of boundaries, the distinction between an inside and an outside, the orientation of rooms and furnishings have also concerned builders in many societies. Even today practitioners of feng shui, whose roots go back to magical beliefs, Taoism, and Buddhism, believe that the erection of shelters (along with other kinds of buildings) requires expert consultation in order to achieve harmony with their environment. From Hong Kong to Manhattan, specialists are
hired to ensure that nature is not insulted by the shapes and layouts of structures. Moving-in ceremonies, consecrations performed with the aid of chants and incense, are contemporary versions of rituals that thousands of years ago involved the sacrifices of animals or human beings.

Where everything is sacred, all buildings require special rites of consecration. In the modern American world of specialized landscapes, sacredness is most intimately linked with religious structures, and it may be appropriate to begin with them. As objects of presentation and inauguration these buildings have stimulated the most elaborate documentation, for they are simultaneously the best-studied and the most controversial sites for such rituals. Religious consecrations, depicted and referenced in various decorative schemes, have even affected the physical appearance of these buildings. “Dedication ceremonies . . . resonated in church art,” writes Herbert Kessler. In certain places, like Hagia Sophia for example, such representation perpetuated the consecration experience for all who subsequently entered the church, much as the design of ancient towns recalled their mythic origins. The mosaics of S. Prassede in Rome apparently depict the dedication of that church in 817. contemporaneous with
their creation. In tile or paint or glass, the consecrating moment was preserved for future generations, an act of self-referencing that would expand to include other building types in later centuries, particularly courthouses, town halls, and capitols.

Church and temple dedications mingled several things simultaneously: purification of the ground and the structure to make them receptive to sacred services; spatial division of the world into holy and profane; exorcism, if the building and its site had been used for pagan or heretical purposes; reaffirmation of faith and purpose; special heroic honor paid to patron saints; national and local demonstrations of pride; conspicuous consumption through expenditure on great scale and adornment; recognition of great donors; gestures of thanksgiving; opportunities for priests and lay people alike to exercise their special skills and reenact their social identities; and, perhaps most significant for some commentators, symbolic reenactment of the encounter between this world and the next, permitting, for the faithful, a foretaste of personal redemption.
Shrine of St. Taurinus, Cathedral of St. Taurin, Evreux, mid-thirteenth century.

Reliquary shaped like church; German, c. 1190.
Across the centuries bitter arguments contested the antiquity and specific lineage of these ceremonies for Christian churches, and furious debates erupted concerning their propriety and theological implications. Nineteenth-century Anglican traditionalists, for example, bent on re legitimating repudiated rituals, insisted that church dedication ceremonies had developed immediately upon the creation of Christian congregations. Some went even further. Every people who erected costly structures for a deity “thought it not enough barely to devote them to the sacred duties of religion, unless they also set them apart by some peculiar and solemn rite of a formal consecration,” the Reverend E. C. Harrington contended in 1844. Harrington ransacked a broad range of sources, including writings of the church fathers and a series of commentaries, to support his position. Contemporary scholarship suggests, however, that before the fourth or fifth century the Church lacked specific and elaborate rites of church dedication; the first surviving rite is apparently sixth century, although relics were removed from earlier places of burial to churches as early as the fourth century. Earlier churches were considered to have been de facto dedicated by the solemn celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist within the building, although older ceremonies included the consecration of the first or foundation stone. And although customary procedures had developed for bishops to dedicate churches in the time of Constantine, the elaboration of the ceremony awaited future events.

What helped change matters was the growing taste, in the Christian West, for relics. Persecution, civil war, and religious violence had produced a long series of saints and martyrs, and a Carolingian Church and state gave them a central cultural role as well as specific functions in oath-taking and church establishment. Pilgrimages, quests, and a lively, if illegal, international commerce, recently elaborated by Patrick Geary, generated treasures and relics. These physical links to a worldwide church, and to history, were translated to Carolingian France and Anglo-Saxon England. Relics required special care and attention—and, among other things, special deposit in a church before the first mass could be said. A church acquired much of its sacral quality not from its association “with a distinctive site,” argues one scholar, but rather through “its possession and sheltering of relics.” “Translations—the movement of relics to people—and not pilgrimages—the movement of people to relics—hold the center of the stage in late-antique and early-medieval piety,” notes Peter Brown. Without this experience the spiritual and physical landscape of Christianity could well have been very different. Brown suggests, perhaps more like the later experience
of Islam, with its permanently holy cities serving as the destination points for pilgrimage.

It seems likely that the translation of relics directly stimulated the development of highly formal ceremonies of church dedication. At their heart, in the Roman Church, was the bishop's placing relics within the cavity of an altar stone, which was then anointed and sealed. Once this was done Mass could be celebrated and the church consecrated. Elaborately decorated and constructed reliquaries and shrines, magnificent enough to be venerated by the congregation, became the proud containers of holy relics, on display for the faithful.

But church dedications were far more complex matters than this simple procedure might suggest, even in the West, and varied greatly according to the specific rite. There were many analogies with other objects, to be sure, such as the elaborate and self-conscious practices associated with the laying of keels and the launching of newly built ships and boats. More direct ancestors can be found in the ceremonies associated with town founding in the ancient world, with their heavy reliance upon divination as to time and place, hollowed-out boundary monuments, and sacrifices. Anointing a stone filled with relics symbolized the act of taking possession. But often the bishop presided over a far more elaborate agenda when it came time
to dedicate a new church: after making three successive processions around the building, supported by his ecclesiastics and large crowds of lay people, he knocked three times with his staff of office on the door of the completed but empty church—empty save for a deacon who would open the door. As the door opened the congregation would literally take possession in the name of God.\textsuperscript{15} If the builder of the church or chapel were a private individual, as opposed to an entire community, he would present the keys to the bishop upon his arrival, an inalienable conveyance of the property to God through God’s representative, the church prelate.\textsuperscript{16} It was crucial, according to some accounts, to have the transfer completed before any communion rite could take place in the newly established church. Processions within the church itself, sprinkling with special Gregorian holy water (a practice that held obvious baptismal implications), signing altars, tracing a great cross filled with an alphabet upon the pavement of the building, anointing twelve crosses affixed to the walls, these constituted a complex and richly symbolic service.\textsuperscript{17}

Any aspect of church consecration might provoke immediate debate and sometimes even physical conflict. Thus the hour of the day or the day of the week for consecration was subject to discussion. In some parts of Europe this was limited to Sundays, but Pope Innocent III gave permission for churches to be dedicated on any day. Other popes approved dedication days to suit their ambitions and conceits.\textsuperscript{18}

Embedded in these ancient ceremonies were notions of purpose and dominion; purpose was indicated not only by prayer service but by actual insertion of sacred objects, dominion by the transfer of the keys. And it was not only the churches as a whole that were specifically consecrated. Each individual altar, honoring a specific saint, required its own ceremonies. In the seventeenth century the bishop of Winchester, Lancelot Andrews, took to perambulating new churches, blessing every piece of furniture within them, and indeed every spot at which prayers might be offered.\textsuperscript{19} Other prelates added their own personal touches, some bishops officiating, in rapid succession, over every possible form of service, from ordinations to burials, in order to inaugurate the space properly.

With their complex histories—building, burning, rebuilding, collapsing, enlarging, running out of funds, reconstructing, adding towers, altars, transepts—taking place over centuries, many ancient church structures were never completely finished. Indeed, the very concept of completing a building as of a specific date, delivering it, as it were, to the owners, all ready to go, is a modern notion. Celebrations of a great cathedral’s final completion awaited the
modern era. The 1880 ceremonies in Cologne typified the newer pattern. Earlier church dedications took place on a continuing basis, with no clear demarcations into absolute beginnings or first uses. And the consecration of a major church or cathedral was often linked to events other than completion of the entire physical fabric; much of the time, once the choir and a portion of the nave were enclosed and usable, the consecration date could be governed by political or military needs.44

The rich elaboration of consecration practices was rudely and abruptly checked in parts of Europe with the coming of the Reformation. The changes would have significant implications for Americans. Strenuously hostile to the veneration of saints and relics, and labeling many Roman Catholic rituals as superstitious nonsense, Protestants quickly tried to erase lingering marks of their older attachments. Catholics, after the Council of Trent, modified their own forms of worship.45 Furious controversies erupted over altar and pew placement, the size and function of the rood screen, incense burning, stained glass, and the nature of the liturgy. Many reformers insisted that the physical church was simply a place of assembly, not a structure that required elaborate and mysterious rites of passage in order to become eligible for Christian worship. The presence of relics seemed unnecessary. Sixteenth-century Protestants defiantly held services in barns, in private homes, and in open fields as well as in churches. As part of their reform program, in England at least, early leaders banned ceremonies of church consecration, along with many other rituals associated with Catholicism. Acts of Parliament regulated the placement of communion tables and altars and even the permissible terminology.

Inevitably, these radical changes produced their own reactions. Even in the seventeenth century a long process of modification and softening began, as bishops and clergy within the Church of England sought to reestablish, albeit with modifications, many older procedures. But by this time the massive emigration to North America had begun, and many immigrants carried as part of their emotional baggage deep suspicion of any need to consecrate holy spaces as worship places.

The meeting houses that would become symbols of New England life and certainly the most important structures in the towns scattered across Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire were subjected to no significant introductory rituals. They were at first, like the town halls and meeting houses of contemporary England, multipurpose in character, sometimes little more than large houses.46 For some years they hosted a variety of community activities besides church
services, including town meetings. At least 250 meeting houses were built in New England during the seventeenth century, and over the next 150 years more than 3,000 additional churches and meeting houses were erected in this region alone.  

Few records document elaborate services marking the inaugural of these structures. And because there was no bishop in the American colonies before the Revolution, certain kinds of ceremonies were impossible, even for those denominations with more complex traditional practices. But if church dedications were simplified and constrained, it was common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for dozens, sometimes hundreds of neighbors to come together to raise the meeting house frame, as they would in later years to raise barns. These were occasions for feasting and celebration—gin, cider, and rum provided as inducements to gain additional workers. Sometimes neighbors threatened not to come unless such rewards were promised. The father of feminist Susan B. Anthony, a Massachusetts Quaker, was celebrated for refusing to bribe these workers with drink. But with alcohol or not, the raising of a roof was a major civic happening in the life of a town.
But no specific ceremonies attended these events. Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian churches were also built in the colonies, along with synagogues—though no cathedrals. All these presumably were subject to specific religious customs at their dedications. but again, records are sparse and community involvement, beyond the congregations themselves, was usually modest.

Buildings began to achieve specialized purpose in the eighteenth century, but what changed everything even more dramatically was the American Revolution and the construction of a whole range of newly charged structures: legislatures, town halls, courthouses, executive mansions. These were not only prime examples of public ownership, they were soon perceived as opportunities for emphasizing communal identity. Both as objects and as investments, public buildings constituted affirmations of faith in the new constitutional system being created in America.

Even more significant was the coincidence of the new political order with the rise to national prominence of the Brotherhood of Freemasons.
This fraternal association, whose roots can be traced back to the stonemason guilds of the Middle Ages and, according to Masonic lore, much further back than that, grew emphatically, self-consciously, and aggressively in the early eighteenth century, first in England, then on the Continent and in North America. The Masonic societies, though they claimed their origins in the building trades, were by that time dominated not by practicing masons but by speculative or accepted masons—that is, by merchants, artisans, professionals, and gentry attracted by the values and ideals the organization proclaimed. Such enthusiasm was stimulated by many impulses, among them anti-Catholicism, enthusiasm for the progressive social and political philosophy associated with the Enlightenment, love of nature, republicanism, a desire for fellowship, and the quest for a Biblically grounded, nonmonarchical ceremonialism, for rituals that expressed certain ethical principles but also preserved the excitement of secrecy and the drama of public theatre. The role of the Masons in the revolutionary ferment of the Western world has been much discussed by historians, who have variously found the lodges to be important nurseries of sociability and democratic self-government or breeding grounds of the Jacobin terror and the seeds of moralizing totalitarianism.

The links between Freemasonry and the new ideology of republicanism have been analyzed as both an intellectual and a stylistic force. Less extensively explored is the emergence of their building ceremonialism, which, in America at least, owed a good deal both to the needs of the new nationalism and to the spirit of Masonry. For at the heart of Masonic myth and legend stands the figure of Hiram, the builder of King Solomon's Temple, accompanied by a glorification of the principles of geometry and the secrets of building. Besides its appeals to benevolence, rationalism, fellowship, and history, Masonry encompassed a profound respect for the centrality and significance of the building arts.

American Masons confronted a remarkable opportunity. During the 150 years of continuous British settlement before the American Revolution, building rituals, as we have seen, were at best understated. For reasons dictated in part by poverty, in part by the dispersion of population, and in part by iconoclastic traditions, most buildings, Masonic halls excepted, were inaugurated in a casual and largely utilitarian manner. Royal and judicial etiquette dictated certain minimal ritual performances, but before the 1770s there were few great structures to celebrate and, in certain places, a religious bias against elaborate ceremonialism. What changed, opening up a new phase of republican ritualism, was elaboration of a political philosophy and development of political practices that were incorporative, integrating natural
and built landscape alike into a cosmic and redemptive scheme of historical progress. The American republic became a grand stage in the evolution of humanity. Public buildings constructed in the interests of nationhood or meant to mark and monumentalize moments in the nation's history were naturally enough invested with special significance and dignity. But even private buildings bore evidence of a desire to share the reflected glory of the new society and to declare their fealty. Thus planning, completion, first uses, demanded ritual recognition and introduction as good republican operations.

But this was also a society that remained hostile—officially, at least—to the gorgeous pageantry, the manipulative pomp, the official splendor of existing monarchies. These rituals were seen as expensive and ultimately enslaving luxuries. The day was saved, in essence, by the presence of the Masons. With its comprehensive procedures, exotic regalia, complex system of historical referencing, and rich array of symbols, all in the cause of rational morality and democratic citizenship, Freemasonry offered a remarkable opportunity for matching lodge practices with the new social needs. The Masons became the ritual mercenaries of the new republic, and the density of their architectural ceremonies was really quite remarkable. Indeed, details of their procedures suggest the elaborate relic insertions that had now been associated with the Church for more than a thousand years and had an even longer history stretching back to ancient Babylon.

Hostile critics attacked Masonry as a "gaudy show," and one of them, Cadwallader Colden of New York, a former Mason himself, found it extraordinary that in a republic country "where we claim to be such pure democrats" there "should be manifested in those who become masons, such a passion for finery, pageantry, dignities and titles." This passion, however, engulfed many more than the Masons.

Thus a new era, probably a first era, began for American architectural ritualism in the 1780s and 1790s. The fact that so many heroes and military leaders of the Revolution, ranging from George Washington, Paul Revere, and Benjamin Franklin to Lafayette and Baron von Steuben, were Freemasons was still another reason to identify civic purpose with specific lodge rituals. With astonishing ease Masons were able to dominate occasions of public dedication, etching their symbolic vocabulary onto the stone foundations of courthouses, battle monuments, city halls, and legislative chambers. In effect the sponsors and funders of these structures—either private members, congregants, and subscribers, for monuments and churches, or taxpayers and governmental bodies for the public buildings—turned over the ceremonial responsibilities for their initiation to lodge members. Some
lodges proved especially active. In the second half of the nineteenth century Iowa’s Grand Lodge laid cornerstones for almost one hundred buildings, including twenty courthouses and thirteen churches. Freemasons became the most obvious instruments for building dedications. It was not unusual for officials who were members themselves to don the aprons favored by the Freemasons and so emphasize their special level of participation.

Of the various ceremonies of architectural introduction, the most significant, so far as Freemasons and republican Americans were concerned, involved the laying of the cornerstone. In later years and in some places, however, an earlier phase in the evolution of the building assumed some symbolic significance: the groundbreaking. Such events might involve nothing more impressive than shovels and spades, but as technology became more complex and machinery more elaborate, with enormous steam shovels to add touches of drama—and they were used first in the 1840s—groundbreakings could become quite dramatic.

Groundbreakings were also opportunities for low comedy and for
developer publicity. As the construction of foundations became more complex, long periods of time might separate the first spadeful of dirt and the appearance of any superstructure. In the case of buildings that were not yet fully paid for, the groundbreaking was a gesture of faith and an opportunity for fund raising. It was a promissory note on a larger outcome, something suggesting a baby shower, held before the fact.

By contrast, the cornerstone laying, like a christening—or, for that matter, a traditional cathedral dedication—represented a somewhat more advanced life stage. The site had to have been prepared, the foundations dug, the designs and dimensions approved. By the time the cornerstone was laid, both appearance and financing were generally fixed. The cornerstone ceremony, then, became an opportunity to introduce a broader public to a coming attraction, and it began a communal time clock, a means of measuring progress toward completion. Sometimes the clock was speeded up; when King Louis XV laid the foundation stone in the mid-eighteenth century for the Church of St. Genevieve, the church that would later become the Pantheon, the royal occasion stimulated creation of a huge canvas-and-wood facade
Foundation-laying cornerstone for Cleopatra's Needle, New York, 1880.

Groundbreaking, Jones Laboratory, University of Chicago, 1928.
model to give participants a preview of the final result.\textsuperscript{16}

The laying of first or cornerstone was described in the Bible and in even more ancient texts; such stones were present in the pyramids, and in the Middle Ages self-conscious ceremonialism surrounded the laying of the first stones for elaborate and expensive buildings like colleges, abbeys, and royal chapels. Like church dedications, first-stone ceremonies excited debates about timing. "Foundation stones were not laid lightly in the Renaissance," J. R. Hale noted wryly in his essay on the Fortezza da Basso in Florence. Astrologers, who had insisted that the building of the Palazzo Strozzi begin at 6 a.m., divided into different camps about the proper date for starting Duke Alessandro de Medici's fortress. After a series of negotiations and mediations it followed upon the bishop's saying of Mass in the early morning of July 15, 1534.\textsuperscript{37} This, like other European foundation or first-stone ceremonies, featured extravagantly clad notables—church officials, noblemen, sheriffs, rectors, lord mayors, and, where possible, royalty—whose presence, in many ways, eclipsed the moment they were meant to celebrate. In the United States, on the other hand, the building, its functions, above all its communal presence remained the primary actor in the pageant.

Modern Masonic cornerstone-laying ceremonies are recorded in
England and Scotland during the eighteenth century, though they were marked by a good deal of improvisation. In the United States the rite was most extensively practiced and broadly understood during the years between the American Revolution and the beginning of the twentieth century. It included, for Americans at least, an unusually complex blend of ritual and symbolism. No detail seemed unimportant. Both the location of the cornerstone and the timing of the ceremony were significant. Ideally, although not invariably, the stone would be placed in the northeast corner of the building. Masonic belief made the north into a place of darkness, the east a source of light. Placing the stone between them symbolized a progression from ignorance to knowledge.

The cornerstone itself, which could weigh several tons, was often presented by the architect as a gift; it could be made of various kinds of stone, but it was usually hollowed out to permit the insertion of a metal box. Into the box, often of copper, would go a variety of documents and memorabilia fixing the moment and the place of the cornerstone laying: newspapers, the names of boards of trustees, directors, governmental officials, Masonic lodge officers, a Bible, the Constitution, books, coins, stamps, currency, sermons, souvenirs, collected papers and speeches, building plans, bottles of whiskey (in the
case of at least one Texas courthouse), descriptions of the community and lists of its leaders' names.40 These were, in effect, anticipatory time capsules of the sort that would be sunk with elaborate precautions in the twentieth century to let future generations gain some sense of what is considered to be our civilization.41 Centuries earlier, coins bearing the likeness of rulers had been thrown into building foundations. By the nineteenth century the enclosure portion of the cornerstone had come to reflect an acute awareness of the historicity of built structures, their potential destruction, decay, or renovation, moments of collapse that might yet preserve invaluable details for successors. Things, in short, "that may be instructive and amusing to remote posterity."42 Or, as the mayor of Omaha declared in the 1890 ceremonies for his city's new city hall, "To its sealed recesses we confide such evidence of our city's present size and prosperity as may serve to interest the busy populace of some future generation, when these firm walls shall have crumbled and the secrets of this cornerstone shall have been brought to light." The humdrum character of the objects placed inside were signs of progress, for "from this recess ... will be taken no weapon of death, no evidence of barbaric wars, but tokens only of peace and prosperity which have hitherto blessed this city."43 In an effort to document the actual moment itself, even copies
of the speeches delivered and the program of the cornerstone day’s events were inserted into the enclosure.44 Such acts captured the intense self-reflexivity that characterized these ceremonies.

Thus, when the United States Capitol was enlarged and a new cornerstone laid on July 4, 1851, Secretary of State Daniel Webster declared, as part of his oration, “If, therefore, it shall hereafter be the will of God that this structure shall fall from its base; that its foundation be upturned and this deposit brought to the eyes of men, be it known that on this day the Union of the United States of America stands firm; that their Constitution still exists unimpaired and with all its original usefulness and glory, growing every day stronger and stronger in the affections of the great body of the American people, and attracting more and more the admiration of the world.”45 Webster was speaking to his compatriots, just thirteen years before the Union actually, if temporarily, broke up. But his speech, which was itself deposited into the cornerstone, was intended, as he suggested, to instruct future generations about the present state of the nation.

The full history of cornerstone laying is yet to be written, but the assumption that the future would be absorbed by details of the past was one of its most significant features. It could be argued that in the new republic, relics had to be future-oriented; instead of the bones of saints, buildings would be built around the mundane desiderata of democratic citizens, of the sort described by the mayor of Omaha: their newspapers, their coins and currency, civic genealogies in the form of local histories, lists of office holders, records of committee meetings, the activities that foreign observers like Alexis de Tocqueville found, simultaneously, so novel and significant.

If this aspect of the ceremony was not specifically Masonic, many other things were. The procession to the cornerstone laying frequently involved the donning of special costumes associated with Masonry, most notably the ornamental aprons decorated with Masonic symbols and suggesting the occupational origins of the lodges; official lodge jewels were displayed, as well as swords, white rods, silver vessels filled with oil and wine, a golden vessel containing corn, and three major building tools: the square, the level, and the plumb. Ceremonial language, when the full Masonic ritual was presented, involved applying the tools to the stone, pronouncing it square, plumb, and level, and pouring upon it corn, wine, and oil, emblems of plenty, joy, and peace. The ceremony was concluded when the Grand Master or his stand-in gave three taps of the mallet to the stone. Other Masons on the scene would then clap their hands and alternately raise and extend their arms, folding them across their
Cornerstone laying,
Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York.
Drawing by T. de Thulstrup,

Laying the cornerstone of Central Building, New York Public Library, 1902.

...often Masonic symbols were carved on the cornerstone itself, or upon bronze tablets affixed to the stone or some other portion of the building. And accompanying this would be music, speeches, and prayers.

Not every cornerstone laying, even in the late eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, exploited the full range of Masonic ceremonies. Indeed, a good many of these occasions were far less elaborate, adopting simpler and briefer programs and doing without the intervention of Masonic officials. Sometimes, in the years after the Civil War, veterans’ organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic, which had available their own suitable array of uniforms and medals, would dominate the proceedings. And congregations might or might not utilize Masonic lodges for their cornerstone laying; purely religious formulas, not so different in many respects from the Masonic procedures, remained available. Thus, slightly more than one hundred years ago,
Meeting the World

when the cornerstone of New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine was dedicated (with the participation of millionaires like J. P. Morgan and Cornelius Vanderbilt), the presiding bishop employed liturgical language, striking the stone with a special hammer when mentioning each member of the Trinity, and smoothing the mortar with a silver trowel while making the sign of the cross upon it.47

But whether religious, civil, or Masonic, the ceremony provided an opportunity to affirm certain values and to associate the coming structure with powerful natural symbols. In unlikely places, and under improbable auspices, the cornerstone rite continued its course. New buildings, like new people, were adventures awaiting resolution. The need to wish the newcomer well, associate it with hopes for long life and prosperity, and above all to dedicate it to the performance of specific services made reliance upon symbolic marks of goodness, bounty, and grace an integral part of the ceremony. These connections were well understood in the Christian West. And
as at christenings, everyone came dressed up. Official costumes and silver trowels added to the sense of occasion. Selecting just the right day—a patron saint’s feast, a donor’s birthday, an institutional anniversary, a patriotic holiday—added to the sense of good fortune. July 4, naturally enough, functioned perfectly for the cornerstone laying of public buildings, while Decoration Day, May 30, served almost equally well for other monuments. The feast, in June, of the nativity of Saint John the Baptist, patron saint of the Masons, proved an especially popular day for dedicating their own temples.

At other times, the presence of the donor inspired the ceremonies. On October 9, 1856, the town of Danvers, Massachusetts, laid the cornerstone for its new Peabody Institute, the gift of philanthropist George Peabody. The governor of the commonwealth, the president of Harvard, scholars, educators, and politicians of importance were all present, and, to mark the occasion, evergreen arches forty feet high were erected along the parade route, along with illuminations, mottoes, portraits, and mounted slogans. These greeted a procession dominated by marching school districts, each with its own float. The cavalcade of
floats and carriages extended nearly half a mile, providing an escort for George Peabody and the other dignitaries. A special publication, lavishly illustrated, celebrated the event.

Introductory rituals did not end with the cornerstone laying, of course. Many years might stretch between the cornerstone and actual completion. The building, in this interval, was growing up, reaching maturity, not yet a functioning member of the larger community. Many cultures have occasions that signal the arrival of physical maturity and the acceptance of communal responsibilities. To celebrate such a status important buildings, aside from a groundbreaking and first-stone laying, featured a third opportunity for official presentation of self: their openings. This offered not only the chance to honor donors and supporters, to invoke history, to measure the progress made since the earlier ceremonies; it also encouraged, at a moment of maximal attention, definition and emphasis of purpose, a service of communion. Church consecrations, of course, had this at their center. But secular buildings frequently mimicked some of their details in the turning over of keys,
for example, or the collective display of civic ceremony. If the structure was a legislature or a courthouse, the governmental officials might march in a body from their old home to their new. Prayers, music, bunting decorations, speeches, and natural symbols, like plants and flowers, were invariably part of civic and institutional openings in nineteenth-century America. Holidays were declared. Special poetry and music could be commissioned, or popular favorites performed. There was a repertory, for example, deemed particularly appropriate to the opening of concert halls and opera houses, Music To Begin Things With: Beethoven’s “Consecration of the House Overture” or the “Ode to Joy” from his Ninth Symphony, portions of Mozart’s Magic Flute, “Hail Bright Abode” from Tannhäuser, or, as in the case of Chicago’s Auditorium Theatre in 1889, the simple singing (by the great soprano Adelina Patti, in the presence of the president and vice president of the United States) of “Home Sweet Home.”

One prevalent category of building opening that attracted widespread interest was the Masonic hall, built in large numbers across the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first building constructed in America for strictly Masonic purposes was erected in Philadelphia and dedicated June 24, 1735. In attendance were Masons in full regalia, accompanied by the firing of cannon and the pealing of bells. The ceremonies began with a service at Christ Church and ended with a banquet in the new hall. In the
course of the next hundred years, as their numbers, wealth, and respectability grew, Philadelphia Masons dedicated ever larger and more costly halls, climaxing by the 1868 cornerstone laying and the 1873 dedication of America's most lavishly appointed and largest Masonic temple, a landmark for downtown Philadelphia. Into this cornerstone the Masons placed pieces of wood and marble believed to be taken from King Solomon's Temple, the physical inspiration for the building plan, along with more usual tokens of time and place. Thirteen thousand participated in the march celebrating the building's opening, and in subsequent days affiliated Masonic groups, including the Knights Templar, dedicated the building anew after providing citizens of the city with spectacular public processions.51

Another institution that accorded its dedication openings great seriousness was the public library, that secular church devoted to literacy, democratic citizenship, and economic mobility. Libraries, here and abroad, also of course enjoyed cornerstone and foundation-stone laying, but they commissioned especially formal celebrations when the buildings were ready for use. Programs could be quite elaborate and lengthy. Frequently library establishment represented a fusion of public and private support. And more than many other building types, libraries easily accommodated literary speechesifying and references to education and learning. Schoolchildren, university students, teachers, public officials, patrons, and collectors—all could be involved with the opening ceremonies, which were repeated in such number that, like the buildings themselves, they seemed almost interchangeable.52 The British opened their libraries with much of the same self-consciousness that Americans did and surpassed them in pageantry with elaborately costumed lord mayors and common councils. Moreover, British ceremonies were often graced by the presence of nobility, sometimes even members of the royal family.53

Secular building openings did not readily correspond with human ceremonies. While groundbreaking might be compared with the presentation of the newborn, and cornerstone laying with a baptism, the opening was a revelation of the mature object. Later on it could be enlarged, refinished, or renovated, but it was now complete in itself. The life cycle had moved on more rapidly than with a human being. The opening might better be compared with a debutante's presentation or perhaps a graduation. Invitations to opening ceremonies often proudly displayed representations of the completed structure.

While cornerstone layings, groundbreaking, and dedications were soon highly standardized building ceremonies, some of the most popular and best-covered nineteenth-century openings did not actually
Opening of the Hackney Central Library, 1908: awaiting the arrival of the Prince and Princess of Wales.

Opening of the Central Library and Technical Institute, West Ham, London. 1898.
inaugurate buildings. This group can be divided into two major categories. The first class consisted of presented objects that required a public unwrapping. In the modern era, gift exchanges make unwrapping crucial to the sense of new ownership, and it is often—and preferably—a witnessed act. Major industries developed to service gift giving, and in some societies wrapping materials themselves—paper, ribbons, boxes—have enjoyed special artistic status.34

Buildings themselves, at least before the era of Christo, were impossible to wrap or unwrap. But they had some close linkages with the unveilings of other large constructed objects, notably statues and monuments. The literal origins of this custom are still not quite clear; The Oxford English Dictionary proposes that the phrase *unveiling a statue* was first used in the 1860s, which seems late. Long before then statues were inaugurated with pomp and pageantry—but not, apparently, with the drama of the lifted veil. Once the practice was in place, however, it grew almost universally popular. Unveiling became a generic label for the larger ceremony of dedication, which was carefully recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through a
series of woodcuts, lithographs, and photographs, many of which were published by newspapers and magazines. Rarely was the design secret, for in many cases competitions had preceded the commission, and construction outdoors could not be easily hidden. But for dramatic purposes the statue, or as much of it as could physically be managed, would be covered, often just hours before being uncovered. This was a symbolic re-creation of the statue’s birth and an emphasis upon its status as gift. Normally monuments in nineteenth-century America were not paid for by tax revenues but were financed by acts of individual philanthropy or through public subscription. They were invariably described as being presented by the contributors to the larger community—gestures of gratitude, loyalty, or benevolence.

Nineteenth-century Europe and America offered thousands, even tens of thousands of such occasions. Patriots, humanitarians, war heroes, monarchs, scientists, artists, millionaires shared honors with explorers, inventors, clerics, saints, not to mention the collective tributes to nationality, religion, republicanism, and the glorious dead. Obelisks, columns, arches, benches, fountains, plinths, towers, colonnades, as well as representations of people seated, standing, recumbent, astride horses, orating, pointing, and otherwise disporting, were numerous enough to constitute almost a new material universe. “The land is cluttered with stones that try ineffectually to lift leaden names out of the dust,” complained one commentator. No sooner did a celebrity die than campaigns were launched for a monument. “It is probable,” observed a group of American architects, “that no important nation, perhaps none at all, has been so unlucky in its monuments as the United States.” Each of these tens of thousands enjoyed its own moment of introduction, orchestrated carefully by authorities and by groups of enthusiastic volunteers. Special holidays increased awareness and ensured crowds of celebrants, while parades, concerts, fireworks, and banquets completed these dedicatory festivals.

Such occasions constituted obvious events for the growing journalistic community to cover; their descriptions emphasized the dramatic elements. A special breathlessness seemed to attend the narration of monument unveilings. From thousands of possibilities I cite the excited reaction of *Harper’s Weekly* to the unveiling of sculptor Harriet Hosmer’s rendition of the old Jacksonian political leader William Hart Benton. The great event took place in St. Louis in 1868. After the scene had been set, the circumstances established, and the crowd described, *Harper’s* turned its attention to the special rituals. Before the ceremony Benton’s statue was enveloped in a muslin robe “gathered in folds
The unveiling of the statue of Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 1899, before and after.
about its apex” and “tastefully bound with crimson cords.” The figure was completely hidden, only the pedestal being visible. Then the daughter of the departed statesman, Jesse Benton Frémont—wife of the great explorer and presidential candidate John Frémont, and a strong-minded and well-published figure herself—ascended the platform and “pulled the tense cord, which broke the fastenings, the veil fell and floated away, the form stood forth in its massive beauty and glory, the cannon off on the hill poured forth the salute of thirty guns...the multitude echoed forth shout after shout of exultant joy,” and the first statue erected west of the Mississippi “was seen permanently fixed in all its grandeur.”

Unveilings of this sort, in large cities and small towns alike, occurred repeatedly in the last decades of nineteenth-century America. The unveiling of statuary constituted a uniquely concentrated set of actions to symbolize a far more gradual and less visible process of construction. But it also made for a special civic event, a status it shared with major architectural and engineering achievements. Unveilings were moments for reflection upon many subjects: community identity, historical events, citizenship, authority, culture, individual greatness. The monument itself rarely received extended commentary, but the purpose behind its construction, the intentions
of its builders, these often received frank and not necessarily uncritical attention. It was at the dedication of the Bunker Hill Monument that Daniel Webster gave one of his most important and frequently cited addresses; it was for the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg that Lincoln offered what was arguably his greatest speech. These were not literally unveilings, but they were preparations for what would come later. And they were paralleled by thousands of similar occasions in France, Italy, Germany, and Britain, these monuments to national unity and identity displaying symbols that, because of recent history, were more contested than the American counterparts.

A second category of opening raised issues beyond commemoration and memory. Instead, civic ambition was here signified by control over nature and demonstrations of technological sophistication. Bridges, tunnels, railroads, canals, aqueducts, sewers, telephones, and telegraph lines linked people, goods, services, and ideas. In a nation that identified itself so closely with expansion and with practical progress,

Opening of the Brooklyn Bridge.
these public works achieved rhetorical grandeur that rivaled the boasts of the monument makers and required their own special moments of inauguration and installation.

The grandest of such achievements stimulated truly heroic celebrations. Thus the Erie Canal, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Atlantic Cable, the Croton Reservoir system, the Eads Bridge, and the Hoosac Tunnel occasioned immense civic festivals and elaborate rituals of completion and dedication. The Erie Canal opening induced a richly dense series of solemn ceremonies. Its dramatic centerpiece came in a performance of unification and intermingling, when water from Lake Erie and from various rivers of the world—the Nile, the Ganges, the Danube, the
Amazon, the Thames, the Rhine—was poured into New York harbor, a marriage meant to confirm a great destiny and to demonstrate international linkages. These 1825 ceremonies climaxed a monthlong triumphant progress down the canal from Buffalo to the city of New York, accompanied by banquets, parades, and the firing of cannon all along its route.60

The scale of the Erie Canal festival was unusual but not unique. Almost sixty years later the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge, finally connecting the rest of the continent with Long Island, provoked a huge celebration. The event was likened to the passage to India; its recent centennial, with its fireworks, illuminations, and special exhibitions, has reminded us just how powerful an event its inaugural could be.61 And in hundreds of small towns and cities throughout the nineteenth century, the arrival of a railroad was greeted with days of speech making, celebrating, and parading.62

The Baltimore and Ohio, one of the most historically self-conscious of American transport ventures, laid a first stone on July 4, 1828, with Masonic ceremonies, to inaugurate its line. Immediately thereafter it sponsored an extraordinary parade and festival featuring
more than fifty guilds. Eventually the first stone was exhumed, restored, and fenced off as a permanent monument.⁶³ The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 was signaled by a public and much-photographed sinking of a golden spike and became itself an emblem of national growth and greatness.⁶⁴

Because of their challenge to or exploitation of natural forces—air, earth, water—bridges, tunnels, railroads, canals, dams, and turnpikes often invoked different ritual forms than did building openings or statue unveilings. The ribbon cutting that allowed first entry to a roadway or a
Setting the keystone, 
Library of Congress, 
southwest clerestory, June 28, 1892.

bridge suggested not only completion, as it did for a building, but also violation of something new and untouched, defining a new kind of movement, leaping across or breaking through a natural chasm. Thus riding on the first boat, train, automobile, or bicycle to pass through the new artery was inherently more dramatic than being the first client of a new store or library. The principle of consummation, termination, culmination, though, is basically the same.

Completion rituals have different meanings, of course, to builders and developers than to the users. And those who actually labor in construction have adopted their own ceremonies. The delivery of the first steel for a skyscraper, for example, can become a significant event, particularly when it is scheduled to coincide with an important date. Thus the backers of the Empire State Building decided to have the first steel work begun on March 17, St. Patrick's Day, to honor the Irish ancestry of the chairman of the group, Alfred E. Smith.65
More general and better known than celebrating materials delivery is the custom of topping out, achieved when the highest point of structural elevation is reached. This could be applied to almost any kind of structure, or to parts of a structure like an arch. Thus the keystone had special meaning, placed at the very crown of the arch and binding the whole together. The keystone’s insertion could be marked by special ceremonies and was occasionally depicted by artists.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries celebration of
structural completion became still more dramatic when skyscrapers reached their final altitude. Often a roof-tree or roof-bush raising would be performed, hundreds of feet in the air. Thus when the Irving Trust Company in Manhattan was topped out in 1930, a fir tree was placed on its topmost column. For certain buildings, particularly speculative office buildings, the roof tree offers an opportunity for promotion and salesmanship akin to groundbreaking or cornerstone laying. Analyzing the custom in Pencil Points some sixty years ago, William Collins linked it to the animism of the Druids and other "children of the forest," who believed that trees contained souls and deserved worship. This faith later evolved into adoration of the forest god, who could be propitiated by the addition of branches and trees to new buildings. In Germany, Sweden, Norway, and other northern countries, a series of ceremonies involving carpenters, master builders, and decorated tree branches were linked to roof raisings. Whatever modern explanations were offered, Collins insisted, the origins could be found in ancient superstitions.56

In some cases today, after the press has been alerted a special steel column is delivered and separately hoisted up to the top of the building. With photographers and newspaper reporters at the ready, champagne toasts are drunk, pictures taken, and short speeches made by owners, builders, and developers. When the final steel column made
it to the site, joked one observer about the photo opportunity session, it was the only time workers saw a clean truck and a clean driver. Sometimes the column has an American flag attached to it. Work continues after topping out; there is usually more steel to be hauled up to complete the structure, and indeed, there is some confusion about when precisely topping out has taken place. "Can it be said to occur when the men begin erecting the highest floor? Or only when they finish the floor?" asks one building historian. It is often up to the caprice of the developers, but even with specific disagreements it is clear some kind of milestone has been reached, something like the perpetually punned-upon high school commencement. With all the ambiguity of a diploma, the being that is the building has reached its final height; now the inner systems and the outer clothing must be inserted and applied.

The actual opening of a building might be relatively modest compared with the ceremonies deployed to open a group of buildings, in particular the international expositions that were hosted so exuberantly by the United States and many western nations in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like
other building projects, such institutions had their groundbreakings and their dedication ceremonies some time in advance, but the scale of expositions was so much larger, and their promise of spectacle so much more generous, that these occurrences were turned into dramatic events of the first order. Chicago's huge Columbian Exposition serves as an apt example. When it was dedicated in October 1892, six months before the actual opening, a crowd of 125,000 people gathered within the confines of the Manufacturer's Palace, "the largest assemblage that was ever brought together under one roof," boasted the official spokesman for the exposition. Seventy thousand were served lunch; a chorus of 5,000 provided music. Prayers, poems, orations, and songs went on for hours. Banquets, receptions, and parades followed downtown, attended by dozens of governors, church prelates, diplomats, and any other notables caught within a five-hundred-mile radius.70

But this was relatively minor compared to the actual opening on May 1, 1893. Here the special effects permitted by the newly installed electri-
cal systems dazzled the assembled masses. Shortly after noon, when President Grover Cleveland touched a gold and ivory electrical button, he set in motion hundreds of engines on the exhibition grounds, loosened one hundred steam whistles, caused guns and cannon to belch out fire and smoke, unfurled more than eight hundred flags and banners from the roofs and towers of exposition buildings, began the chiming of bells, spurted water from fountains, unveiled Daniel Chester French’s great Statue of the Republic, and set free two hundred snow-white doves. Or, to quote a more rhapsodical description, “at one and the same instant the audience burst into a thundering shout, the orchestra pealed forth the strains of the Hallelujah Chorus, the wheels of the giant Ellis engine in Machinery Hall commenced to revolve, the electric fountains in the lagoon threw their torrents toward the sky, a flood of water gushed from the MacMonnies Fountain...the thunder of artillery came from the vessels in the lake, the chimes in Manufactures Hall and on the German Building rang out a merry peal, and overhead, the flags at the top of the poles in front of the platform fell apart and revealed two gilded models of the ships in which Columbus first sailed to American shores.”71 In some ways the exposition itself might have been anticlimactic after all this, but fortunately the White City in Jackson Park delivered on its high expectations.

President Cleveland touched the electrical button in the actual presence of the structures being opened, but within twenty years it was possible to inaugurate buildings by remote control. The spectacular debut of Cass Gilbert’s Woolworth Building, so lovingly publicized and imposingly decorated it had become a national event, was stage-managed to a great extent. Its planning and construction progress had been covered on an almost monthly basis by newspapers and national magazines, and its 1913 dedication was highlighted by President Wilson’s pressing a button, while still in Washington, to illuminate the building. During the next quarter-century American presidents dignified many such occasions while remaining at their desks, relying upon the power of long-distance electricity. The Empire State Building, for example, which hosted a daylong party for its opening, May 1, 1931, covered both by radio and by newsreel cameras, had President Hoover push a switch in the White House that turned on the lights in the main lobby.72 Just a few years later Franklin Delano Roosevelt punched a telegraph key to signal the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge, three thousand miles away.73

Today’s new buildings are often attended with ceremonial gestures whose ritual presence has not altered fundamentally for two hundred years. Groundbreaking, cornerstone laying, topping, and dedication-
opening still mean something to builders, owners, and users, though they are now more rarely the subject of civic celebrations. Architecture, in fact, is one area of life where an arcane ceremonialism has survived to an extraordinary degree. Indeed, the building art may be called its most welcoming asylum. Scale, cost, and presence argue for a set of structuring rituals, in order to focus and concentrate collective attention. And where public works are involved, they signal part of the larger drama of technological intervention, whose rhetoric of progress through mastery is nurtured by celebration of engineering triumphs. That such structures—the tunnels, bridges, railroads—are often achieved at the cost of many lives, makes their opening ceremonies still more necessary as gestures of tribute and affirmation.

One exception to this enthusiasm for building ritual may seem to be domestic architecture. It has received limited attention here, largely because most people in contemporary America don’t build their own homes. More typically, residents and new owners move in only after these structures have been lived in by generations of predecessors; many of them are renters, and people have multiple places of residence in the course of a lifetime.

But the move into a residence, previously owned and rented or not, is attended by various popular rituals, among them the housewarming. Throughout history house completion and house possession have attracted special signs and symbols. The threshold and the hearth have been attended by their own divinities; the doorpost as a boundary mark or a display center forms a subject all its own. One of the most ancient of all rituals derives from the injunction to Jews in Deuteronomy, “And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house and upon thy gate.” Here is the origin of the mezuzah, the covered scroll mounted on a doorjamb that can be seen each time the home is entered or left. Some of the various commentaries on this custom argue that the scroll was intended to remind occupants of God’s watchfulness and guardianship and of their special relationship to his word. Its location was significant. Such a sign, for example, was unnecessary for the synagogue, the House of God, because those who entered and left it required no additional reminder of their faith. Consecration of private dwellings is, then, traceable at least as far back as the time of Moses.

Entry into or departure from the house at solemn occasions—weddings and funerals—is also attended by special ceremonies in many cultures. These focus on reaffirming the sanctity or the purity of the household. Sometimes it is merely the washing of hands before crossing the threshold, or the eating of bread and salt, or the practice of offering new householders symbols of health and prosperity. The
doffing of shoes in Japan is another device that honors the domestic space. All these are practical efforts to zone the home, to emphasize its claims to purity and privacy, to withdrawal, separation, and intimacy.

Within such spaces other tastes and customs underline the home’s status as a nursery of morals and a teacher of values. At the turn of the twentieth century the arts and crafts movement, in Europe and America, seemed to endorse the pedagogic value of interior design, moving well beyond the practice of hanging framed samplers. Mottoes, quotations, and titles might be inscribed or painted on furniture or on living room and dining room walls. Often clad in specially evocative letter forms, they frequently reinforced an atmosphere of respect for antiquity, for authority, for tradition and the family. Sometimes mottoes were even employed in work settings, such as factories and offices—for example, the extraordinary and innovative building that Frank Lloyd Wright
designed for the Larkin Company in Buffalo. Here, in carved and painted form, in sculptural reliefs as well as words, were expressed “the virtues of work and the global aspirations of the Larkin Company.”

All these may be termed symbols of demarcation and presence rather than of inauguration and installation. They could apply to old structures as well as to new ones, and they were meant to influence and refer to broad patterns of social behavior. But in all their variety they are also reminders of the significant role played by marking as a means of taking and then indicating possession. The millions of plaques, tablets, carved emblems that adorn our buildings supply a huge reservoir of evidence. Their historical summaries, sculpted scenes, invocation of heroes, expressions of purpose are modern versions, albeit serving different functions, of the steles which once stood in the agoras of Greek cities, whose inscriptions, as Joseph Rykwert concluded, reminded each inhabitant of “the decrees and oaths which bound his city to its colonies, or, if it was itself a colony, to the mother town, and described
in detail the part which they undertook to play in each other's political and economic life. The plaques commemorated the associations and purposes that the building's cornerstone laying and dedication offered as performance. But unlike the monuments of earlier ages, they rarely became in themselves part of any ongoing ritual.

Another such indication could be found in the naming of structures. For if the birth, baptism, and rites of adulthood have any bearing as analogies, surely the giving of a name to a building must be acknowledged as a humanizing gesture. The christening baptism of a ship, after all, is fundamentally the bestowal of its name. And, after certain “raisings” of buildings in preindustrial America, there was a general call for a name to be given the frame, a temporary one to be sure, frequently far more elegant and pretentious than any the building itself might bear.

Moreover, buildings are frequently named for their immediate predecessors, the way children are named for their parents or other relatives. In many cities office buildings bear the titles that previous structures on the same site once bore, or memorialize the owners of houses and
homesteads which once stood there. New York’s Everett Building, or 200 Park South, memorializes the Everett House, one of the city’s major hotels, erected fifty years earlier. In Cleveland, a series of Williamson Buildings were opened on the Public Square, on the site of the Williamson family homestead.

But the parallels between personal and building names are not all reinforcing. So far as private dwellings are concerned, customs vary considerably. In England, at least, country and suburban houses usually bear names, perhaps an inheritance of the practice of naming castles and manor houses, a usage that dates back to the Middle Ages. And in some countries on the Continent the habit is even more widespread.78

Americans, except for the owners of great houses and some whimsical country places of the past two centuries, have not generally adopted this habit. On the whole names have been reserved for collective and corporate structures (office buildings and apartments) or donor opportunities (university buildings, for example, hospitals, libraries, museum wings).79 Some have argued that such names are often meant to compensate for the anonymity of an address, personalizing an otherwise impersonal collectivity. And the naming of a building, sometimes undertaken long after it has been open, is not usually attended with the same significance as the naming of a person or of a ship, in part because most buildings also have addresses. Addresses, of course, can sometimes be vanity operations in them-
Sylvia Apartment House, 59
West 76th Street, New York.

selves, as self-consciously achieved as the names. Hence the apartment building on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue known as One Magnificent Mile. Faced with the problem of rushing aid to buildings in emergencies, municipal authorities have recently been insisting upon standard and recognizable addresses for all structures.80

With occasional exceptions, then, an address provides an alternate and usually permanent identity, while building names can be obscure in origin, misleading, and changeable.81 This has made some original owners unhappy. John D. Rockefeller actually repurchased a building in Cleveland upon discovering that the new owners intended to abandon the Rockefeller name.82 And whatever transformations of ownership, it is hard to give up thinking about the Chrysler or RCA or New York Times buildings in any but their baptismal labels. But admittedly their rituals of dedication and opening were really about things other than their titles.

The multiple-dwelling house is another type, along with the office building, exempt from the general American indifference to building names. The rule is, Harper’s Weekly reported in an 1894 survey of apartment buildings, “the poorer the house, the finer the name.”83 The author of this article found streets lined with tenements called variously the Pembroke, the Warwick, the Bayard, and the Sidney. This fit easily within a broader aping of English customs that attracted the attention of contemporary satirists and cartoonists, aroused by Anglophile pretensions. Such pretensions were expressed by every-
thing from dress fashions to the millionaires' delight in marrying off their daughters to English peers, but in building terms it involved the popularity of certain names, particularly for country villas, and the practice of calling hotels and apartments the "something" Arms. This convention invoked the custom of British inns in sporting the coats of arms of local nobles as a sign of their own pretensions. American owners and builders were subject to no local limitations, of course. They could wander at will through the United Kingdom and across Western Europe and beyond for inspiration. But by 1912 concerned Detroiers complained that they had almost run out of suitable names for apartment buildings, so fastidious had the taste become.84

In the case of office buildings, the name can testify to the size, wealth, and prestige of a major corporation. Speculative structures frequently entice major tenants by the promise of naming the new building after them. As a major space user, the renting corporation reaps the additional publicity. But these names are simply indexes to corporate power.

Students of naming and its history have analyzed changing patterns for apartment-house complexes, hotels, streets and boulevards, and, more recently, real-estate subdivisions.85 And they have linked the rise
and fall of favored motifs—animal, vegetable, and mineral—to marketing programs and changing social inclinations. What appears to be the play of entirely arbitrary materials and allusions can reveal more deeply based cultural patterns, as well as subtly changing preferences for certain natural landscape features and national cultures.

With names and naming we have arrived at issues of inscription. Builders of apartments, hotels, suburban tracts, and speculative office buildings remain eager participants in the process of historicizing space and dignifying buildings through the associational references that names can provide. Sometimes the generic term itself—hotel, lodge, motel, inn, cottages, resort—comes into question, aside from the specific title. But naming is itself merely a first step. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries printed descriptions and graphic renditions multiplied as devices meant to affirm structural personality and identity. They proved especially popular at opening celebrations and at a few other special moments in the structural life cycle. Thus the idea of the anniversary, the marking of historical time, which I shall explore in the next essay. It is this ceremony that forms the bridge between building birth and infancy and its coming of age. Since the ability to read helps mark, for many, the achievement of personal self-consciousness, it is probably relevant that the next essay relies so extensively on published descriptions, maps, and literary representation.

The complex ceremonial systems that have evolved to mark the commencement, completion, and human initiation of built structures can be broken down into any number of categories. They are often meant to distinguish, among other things, the secular from the sacred, the public from the private, the local from the national. Such rituals deserve far more careful exegesis than can be offered here. For they offer revelations about the cultural makeup of the community and the social status of the constructive arts. As with any rites of passage, variety and deviation are at war with convention. Despite their diversity, these acts centered around the beginnings of building life. Most of the building’s career lay ahead. In the following essay we shall see the subject through its next stages, moving from the promise of youth through the achievements of maturity. For many buildings, as for many people, genealogy proves a less reliable guide to future fortunes than the nurture afforded (or denied) by the larger environment. Health, safety, and reputation depend heavily on this encounter.