



PROJECT MUSE®

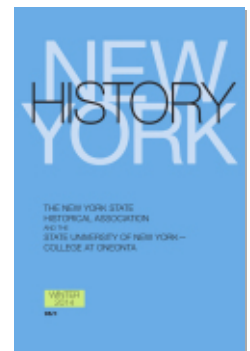
Media Capital: Architecture and Communications in New York City by Aurora Wallace (review)

James West

New York History, Volume 95, Number 1, Winter 2014, pp. 130-132 (Review)

Published by Cornell University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nyh.2014.0063>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/713151/summary>

🔗 *For content related to this article*

https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=713151

Media Capital: Architecture and Communications in New York City.

By Aurora Wallace. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012, 192 pages, \$80.00 Cloth, \$25.00 Paper.

Reviewed by James West, University of Manchester

In this fascinating study, Aurora Wallace explores the connection between the expanding American media industry and the New York City skyline throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Complementing her rich use of secondary literature and newspaper sources with a delightful array of photographs, building designs and advertisements, Wallace focuses on the architectural ambitions of newspaper barons and their use of the city as a space in which to inscribe and assert their power. Building on the work of philosopher, literary critic and novelist Umberto Eco, who has argued that architecture and the mass media share a number of characteristics including their role as forms of communication and the periodic indifference of their public audience, Wallace argues for a mutually supporting relationship between newspapers and urban space, built around industrial capitalism, geographic concentration, and a specialization of labor. She contends that for publishers such as Benjamin Day of the *New York Sun*, James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* and Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, architecture was an intimate part of their editorial designs and ambitions, from functioning as a symbol of publishing success, to intersecting the public and private realms through being constructed as “contributions to the greater good, civic pride, and the provision of space and amenities for the public, rather than for corporate providers” (5).

The opening chapter examines the role of the penny press in making news accessible to working class citizens through the *New York Sun* and the *New York Herald*. As Wallace illustrates, the centrality of New York as a shipping port and the natural contours of Manhattan proved propitious for newspaper development. In particular, the city’s secular nature, particularly when compared to the religious Puritanism of cities such as Boston, provided fertile ground for the development of the fourth estate. These early newspapers situated themselves on Park Row in order to locate their offices between the political hub of City Hall, the financial nexus of

Wall Street, the East River Ports as a source of shipping and foreign news and the Five Points slum for exposes on crime and injustice. Chapter Two focuses on the emergence of the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune*. Through their adoption of the tower form and architectural strategies such as embedding their names on the building's facades, Wallace argues that these newspapers embraced skyscrapers as an important medium for the construction of their corporate image.

The volume's third and fourth chapters explore the attempts of newspapers to present themselves as forward thinking publications both geographically and architecturally, first through the move away from Park Row by the *Tribune* and the *Times*, and then the turn towards modernism through the Art Deco design of the *New York Daily News*. In chapter five, Wallace argues that in the post-World War II period a number of factors including media consolidation, labor strikes and increasing suburbanisation sent the print media into architectural retreat. By the 1960s, she contends that in contrast to the architectural battles between newspaper barons in the previous century which served as grand advertising platforms for their publications, the "image of the newspaper building in the late 1960s conjured in the public mind was now simply one of picket lines" (127). However, in her epilogue, Wallace charts how the emergence of three new twenty-first century media skyscrapers in the shape of the AOL-Time Warner Building, the Hearst Building, and the *New York Times* Building illustrate how media corporations have been able to adapt their headquarters to a new global media industry and create a "new architecture of media conglomeration" (132) which stresses corporate transparency and environmental sensitivity. In doing so, these structures work to reposition the newspaper skyscraper as an acceptable means of corporate self-presentation and as a justifiable architectural statement in an age of excess and corporate malfeasance.

The strengths of this text lie in Wallace's ability to bring out many of the nuances connecting newspaper strategies and editorship with the broader geographical milieu of New York both on a micro and macro level, whether through focusing on the ways in which individual building's reflected the aims of the publications housed within them (the *Times* Building was described by one architectural handbook as "the *New York Times* in stone") or exploring the ways in which these building's physically

projected news into the city through their use of “live” architectural facades which “moved the site of news off the page and outside of the newsroom” (55). Wallace also ably demonstrates how the media can be understood not only as a set of circulating forms, but as places that help to direct and dictate popular conceptions of urban space and city living, both through their own intercity movement and their role in determining the shape of the city itself. Similarly, her account of the contestation between Joseph Medill Patterson and the city council over zoning restrictions for the *Daily News* building highlights the ways in which newspaper skyscrapers, like their publications, have often straddled both public and private interests.

Although perhaps not within the parameters of this study, it would have been fascinating to see Wallace delve more deeply into the cultural politics surrounding the media landscapes she depicts. For example, the move northwards by newspapers such as the *Tribune* and the *Times* can be read not only as an attempt to distance themselves from the “cheap and vulgar scandal papers” and their connection to corrupt political machines of the late nineteenth century, but also a retreat into white-dominated districts and away from the ethnic and racial enclaves of Chinatown, Little Italy and the Lower East Side, particularly within the context of a significant influx of central and eastern European migrants at the end of the nineteenth century. The geographic mobility of many newspapers profiled by Wallace contrasts with the affiliation of ethnic newspapers to particular communities, such as the *Jewish Daily Forward* and the erection of the Forward Building on the Lower East Side at the height of the publication’s popularity in 1912. Despite these oversights, this is an innovative and exciting account that broadens our understanding of the intersections of media and architecture. This study is ideal for scholars and readers interested in media history, urban studies, and New York architectural history.