



The mythic city: movies have turned Manhattan into an image of metropolitan life, both idealised and nightmarish, as in *Ghostbusters*, made in 1984. Photograph: Kobal

The Manhattan projection

Who better than a movie-mad architect to explain New York's visual impact on our world?

PHILIP FRENCH

Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies

by James Sanders

Bloomsbury £30, pp498

JAMES SANDERS'S book is about two cities, both called New York – 'one is a real city, an urban agglomeration of millions. The other is a mythic city, a dream city, born of that most pervasive of dream media, the movies'. It is a marvellous account by a practising architect with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the movies, of how the cinema turned Manhattan into an image of metropolitan life, both idealised and nightmarish, that is shared by people the world over. The events of 11 September have given additional point and poignancy to his book, though it was in such a late

stage of production that Sanders was just able to insert a brief prefatory note to acknowledge the fact.

The wise decision not to revise his text saved him from the temptation to give more attention to the World Trade Centre, or to sentimentalise it. In fact it is the building that attracts the greatest opprobrium as an example of soulless anonymity – and Sanders refers to it twice. The first occasion is when he compares the 1933 version of *King Kong* (where the ape scales the Empire State Building) with the wretched 1975 remake (in which Kong slithers up the smooth side of one of the Twin Towers and has nothing to do when he reaches the top). The second comes in a discussion of *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) in which the innocent eccentric Robert Redford goes on the run through the older city while his deadly pursuers, the impersonal CIA, attempt to track him from the World Trade Centre.

Sanders begins at the beginning with the birth of an American film industry in New York, and how its immigrant pioneers departed for California, partly because of the climate, partly to escape paying tribute money to those who claimed to own patents to all film equipment. With the coming of sound and the Wall Street Crash, they were followed to Hollywood by the best writers and composers, who, in exile and loathing Los Angeles, created on screen 'a mythic, bigger-than-life movie New York'.

In its ultimate magical form, this skyline became the Emerald City of Oz

They were abetted by the art departments whose designers – competing with Manhattan's architects – built a magical Manhattan on the sound stages and

back lots of the big studios. Their efforts ranged from the art deco nightclubs atop skyscrapers where Astaire danced with Rogers at RKO, to the grimy tenements at Warner Brothers where gangster Jimmy Cagney battled with Fr Pat O'Brien for the allegiance of the *Dead End Kids*. As an establishing shot, he says, only Times Square at night announcing a tale of Broadway romance could match the majestic, infinitely varied skyline of New York. In its ultimately magical form this skyline became the Emerald City of Oz. Sanders writes unpatronisingly of such matters, without recourse to architectural jargon and with elegant clarity.

After World War II, under the influence of combat documentaries and Italian neo-realism, filmmakers returned to the streets of New York. One of the first was Billy Wilder, which caused S. J. Perelman to remark: 'In transferring *The Lost Weekend* to the screen, the

producers sought verisimilitude by bringing Ray Milland to Third Avenue (in the past Third Avenue had been brought to Ray Milland).' The crucial film in this move back east was Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* (1947), which through its TV spin-off made universally famous the concluding tag: 'There are eight million stories in the Naked City, this has been one of them.'

The big Hollywood studios had always been run from head offices in Manhattan, and as production declined in California so an independent or semi-independent cinema grew up around New York, with an annual output that sometimes exceeded 200 pictures. The facilities provided by the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting created by John Lindsay in 1966 were a major attraction. With so many movies, New York became a barometer of popular attitudes towards urban life. In the

1970s, Pauline Kael called the cinema's New York 'Hell City', and Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* called it 'a metaphor for the last days of American civilisation'. It became that in John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* (1981), in which a future Manhattan is isolated as a maximum security prison. A more optimistic New York was created by Woody Allen, whose *Manhattan* and *Hannah and Her Sisters* paid special, nostalgic attention to the city's architecture.

If Sanders has a special favourite, it's Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, to the production and complex implications of which he devotes a dozen pages, for it brings together many of his chief themes – architecture, community, 'perceived privacy', alienation, isolation, shared and personal space.

To order *Celluloid Skyline* for £27, plus p&p, call the Observer Books Service on 0870 066 7989