

The Weekend Australian
Edition 1SAT 19 OCT 2002, Page B08
THE EDIFACE COMPLEX
By Evan Williams

Does the heart of American cinema beat in Hollywood or Manhattan? It's a moot point
Evan Williams

Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies
By James Sanders, Bloomsbury,
498pp, \$85

JAMES Sanders has written a long and lavish hymn of praise to New York City and American movies. New York, not Hollywood, he argues, is the true centre of the movie industry.

It's a provocative notion that he supports with a wealth of argument and a prodigious movie erudition. Hollywood may be the place where most films are made but New York where many of the greatest movies have been set, and the city from which many American directors -- Martin Scorsese, William Wyler, Sidney Lumet, Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen -- have drawn their inspiration.

But Sanders goes further. The "real" New York is indistinguishable from the New York movies. This is more than another way of saying that movies give a heightened view of New York is a mythic city that can be fully experienced and understood only through cinema. "Other" New York is a kind of adjunct to the real city but it is what gives New York its urban greatness, shared by only a few places in history -- London, Rome, Vienna, Constantinople -- the "storied" or "fabled" cities of the past.

If New York defined the movies, the skyscraper defined New York. The Empire State completed two years after the stockmarket crash of 1929, became a powerful symbol of resurgence. The notion of New York as a city in the clouds was endlessly reinforced. Among other things, Sanders explores two recurring themes in films -- the tenement skyscraper penthouse, defining elements of New York architecture.

Fritz Lang's futuristic high-rise city in *Metropolis* (1926) became a model of much that was to come. In the musical *Ju Fox's* art department eclipsed even Lang with a vision of New York as it might be in a place of spidery towers and broad, teeming freeways.

The glitziest nightclubs were routinely set in spangled, glass-walled palaces high above the imposing skyline panoramas dominated such films as *The Fountainhead* (1949), *Hush* (1948), the Coen brothers' *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994). The Radio Centre in *Top Gun* (1937) was a glittering starlit dome capped by an even more fanciful vision, the *Man of Steel* one of John Harkrider's designs for a transparent dance floor 305m above the street. Woody Allen, the most devoted interpreter of New York's seductiveness, returned to *Radio Days* (1987) with a poetic recreation of 1940s Times Square seen from a sky observation deck. Spectacular rooftop sets were used for the climactic battle in *Ghost* and for scenes in the fantasy *New York of Batman* (1989).

Sanders finished his book a few weeks before September 11. All references to the World Trade Centre, as a last-minute explanation, have been left unaltered. As such they have a certain poignancy, but the never one much loved by film-makers. Although it superseded the Empire State as building (until it was eclipsed by the Sears Tower in Chicago), it had none of the iconic movies of the older, romantic skyscrapers.

In *Independence Day* (1996), aliens destroyed the Empire State and the Statue of Liberty couldn't be bothered with the WTC. True, it was reduced to rubble in *John Carpenter's New York* (1981), and *King Kong* scaled it in Paramount's 1976 remake of the old classic as Sanders complains, Kong never looked convincing on those sheer, glassy surfaces of the WTC as "soulless" and "overbearing".

For Hollywood art directors, other key New York locations were the Chrysler Building (1932), the RCA building with its rooftop nightclub, Washington Square, MOMA, Guggenheim, the Plaza. For Sanders, everything about the city can be subsumed in the New York's other-worldliness: the endless network of corridors and passageway Station, the "mysterious darkness" of Central Park, the colours of 42nd Street at night, the "essential city of alienation and disconnectedness" explored in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and the ordinariness of the plainest Brooklyn thoroughfare (*Dog Day Afternoon*). As the war

has put it: "New York was no mere city. It was, instead, an infinitely romantic and mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining dream itself." And city that had everything, it was also the perfect setting for anything. Nothing in it or out of place: a gorilla climbing a skyscraper or an actor twisting an ankle to give a break.

The movies, Sanders points out, were born in New York long before they went to a dazzling technological and cultural explosion that in a little more than 20 years revolutionised modern newspapers, picture magazines, popular songs, musical recordings and network radio. Hollywood was built by New Yorkers -- the "furrier salesmen turned theatre owners" who had worked their way up from the Lower East Side migrated from Europe. The big decisions were taken by the "home office" -- the headquarters of the studios or their financial backers. Clark Gable may have lived in his pay cheque was signed in Broadway. Warners, RKO and Paramount all had their New York skyscrapers. Even MGM's legendary mogul Louis B. Mayer answered to Marquand boss back east.

Sanders's book is rhapsodic, obsessive and starry-eyed, and its central argument doesn't seem to understand it -- seems a little less than convincing. But it is gorgeously readable and the choice of film stills alone makes it an essential buy for film buffs. Like most Sanders keeps returning to Woody Allen. An architect, Sanders loves the attention Allen's films. *Manhattan* and *Hannah and Her Sisters* were in many ways travelogue key scene in *Annie Hall* (1977) has Allen and Diane Keaton flirting on a rooftop terrace. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) that the twin visions of the city, one real, one imaginary, unforgettable.

Cecilia (Mia Farrow), a Depression-era housewife enslaved by a bullying husband, in the world of movies. One day her movie idol steps from the screen to take her back to meet the people of her fantasies. If there is an enduring metaphor for the 20th-century art form -- whether based in Hollywood or Manhattan -- this has always struck me as beguiling. Whisked from one rooftop nightclub to another, Cecilia is finally returned to her hero's penthouse apartment and offered the skyline stretched out below her. Even she returns to the "real" New York of humdrum tenements and noisy streets, but New York is always waiting for her, as it is for all of us.

1300655191, Australian Books Direct, \$76.50

Caption: Cityscapes: Clockwise from far left: shooting a rear-projection scene, 1940s; *Manhattan*; constructing a miniature skyline for *Rope*, with Hitchcock, right, "floating" a cloud; the comic book production drawing for *Ghostbusters*; a poster for *Metropolis*; and *King Kong* runs amok, centre.
illus: Photo
Section: REVIEW **Type:** Review

© News Limited. All rights reserved. You may read this article on-screen or print it once for your own personal use. You may not make further copies, forward it by email, post it on an internet or intranet site or make any other use without the permission from us at newstext@news Ltd.com.au