



Figure 4.14 New York skyline

the maximum building height at 130 feet (39.6 m), similar to that of Boston and Chicago at the time. There is no mention in the Act of the skyline or the Capitol or any other monument . . . the Act has served the city well. Attempts by the real estate and building industry lobbies to revise the figure upwards have been effectively counterbalanced by the preservation movement, which fought to declare all of the L'Enfant plan off limits to highrise development and push beyond until the surrounding rim of hills' (Kostof, 1991).

The skyline of the contemporary city, particularly in Europe, is a negotiated symbol. The city silhouette is the official profile that is, in part, the result of a competitive struggle. Ultimately, it is licensed or condoned by state and city authority; it is a

political statement and as such its effect is simply the decoration that is possible in the circumstances. The skyline in the current political world is dynamic or chaotic depending upon one's viewpoint. It is continually changing, the result usually of the uncoordinated efforts of individual institutions striving to decorate and to put their own distinctive mark upon the skyline.

The harbinger of all modern high-rise cities is New York. Much of the dramatic effect of the New York skyline derives from the sheer concentration of tall buildings on a severely limited area of land constrained by the Hudson and East rivers. The skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan seen *en masse*, for example from the Brooklyn Bridge, present a dense array, seemingly squeezing all the space out

between them like an early cubist painting. Despite the flat plain of Manhattan Island, the effect is that of a city on an undulating terrain, a series of man-made hills, no doubt reflecting the underlying property values but analogous to shapes found in undisturbed nature. Unfortunately, the exceptional height of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre have introduced a new scale which dwarfs the rest of Lower Manhattan. Until they are matched by a number of other towers, the twin towers of the World Trade Centre will have introduced a dominance, one which the system of free competition they are intended to embody does not support. The hegemony the twin towers appear to suggest is at odds with the competitive vitality of the rest of Lower Manhattan (Figure 4.14). The effect of Lower Manhattan is repeated at Mid Manhattan. Here the Empire State Building, though the biggest building of the group, is better related to the heights of the surrounding buildings and does not suggest a dominant monopoly of space and power.

THE TALL BUILDING AS A DECORATIVE ELEMENT

In a traditional city skyline the uncontrolled, or uncontrollable, appearance of tall buildings, and in particular buildings of unusual shapes, detracts from the clarity of urban form and skyline by competing for attention with those buildings of ostensibly greater public significance. In the commercial city skyline, however, it could be argued that all means of distinction are legitimate. The Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco, for example, is a building of unusual form (Figure 4.15). Originally a very controversial and unpopular building due to its distinctive and eye-catching form, it has since come to be appreciated by the citizens of San Francisco for its significance as a landmark. Attoe states that it is now used as a landmark for shipping in the San Francisco Bay area (Attoe, 1981). In emulation of Paris' Eiffel Tower, many cities have also attempted



Figure 4.15 Transamerica Pyramid, San Francisco

to build distinctive and unique 'status' towers - such as the Space Needle in Seattle or the Aerilon tower in Liverpool - that could fix a city's collective image. Not all of these have been effective. The skyline of Prague, for instance, is particularly disfigured by the 100 m high Zizkov television tower. Such buildings can be used individually to give distinction to the skyline, but their use *en masse* can trivialize. Arguably, however, what is more important than unusual shapes and forms, is the design of the attic and ground floor of tall buildings. It is these parts of tall buildings which are seen and experienced by people in the city. At its base the tower building forms part of the streetscape, immediately apparent to the passer-by. The top of the tower block is only seen from afar and, as the