Part of the beginning of the “skyscraper”

The building is remarkable for its steel-framed structure, which allowed a dramatic increase in window area created by bay-wide windows, which in turn allowed for the greatest amount of daylight into the building interiors. This provided larger displays of merchandise to outside pedestrian traffic creating the idea of the sidewalk showcase. In between the windows were lavish bands of terra cotta that replaced the earlier plan for white Georgia quarries because it was lightweight and inexpensive. Another reason for the change in what type of marble they would use in construction was that stonecutters were having a strike in 1898 during the time of construction. The lavish Bronze-plated cast-iron ornamental work above the rounded tower was also meant to be functional because it was to be as resilient as a sheet of copper. Both the use of bronze and terra cotta was important to setting the building apart from others because it was essentially fire resistant. It created a sense of monumentality. Sullivan thought the building would be an asset to the city for a long period of time. To ensure this great building would last and be resilient against the threat of fire, there was a 40 ft water tower put on the roof to supply the sprinkler system with enough water.

Sullivan can also be seen as a fascinating indicator of the relationship between architecture and commerce

Sullivan wrote his treatise on skyscraper architecture, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” in 1896

In it, Sullivan analyzed the problem of high-rise commercial architecture, arguing with his famous phrase “form must ever follow function” that a building’s design must reflect the social purpose of a particular space

Sullivan illustrates this philosophy by describing an ideal tripartite skyscraper. First, there should be a base level with a ground floor for businesses that require easy public access, light, and open space, and a second story also publicly accessible by stairways. These floors should then be followed by an infinite number of stories for offices, designed to look all the same because they serve the same function. Finally, the building should be topped with an attic storey and distinct cornice line to mark its endpoint and set it apart from other buildings within the cityscape. For Sullivan, the characteristic feature of a skyscraper was that it was tall, and so the building’s design should serve that goal by emphasizing its upward momentum.

Sullivan adapted these ideas to a new context, a department store for the Schlesinger & Mayer company that was soon purchased by Carson, Pirie, Scott.

The wide rectangular window frames and relatively squat twelve-story frame were intended to meet the specific requirements of a department store, whose mission called
for expansive open spaces to display products to customers, not endless individual offices.

- the building’s continuous operation well into the twenty-first century speaks not only to the prestige of Sullivan’s name, but also to the sustained value of architecture as a corporate symbol.