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Book Review

The World Trade Center Tragedies

Twin Towers: The Life of New York City's World Trade Center (1999) by Angus Kress Gillespie. 263 pages. Available from Routledge.

Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center (1999) by Eric Darton. 241 pages. Available from Basic Books.

After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City (2002) Eds. Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin. 236 pages. Available from Routledge.

Starting from Zero: Reconstructing Downtown New York (2003) by Michael Sorkin. 143 pages. Available from Routledge

Paul Levine

There are two tragedies connected with New York's lamented World Trade Center. The second is that it was brutally destroyed by fanatical Islamic terrorists. The first is that it was ever built at all. Indeed, the story of its construction is every bit as complex as the story of its destruction. The World Trade Center (WTC) was conceived in the 1950s and completed in the 1970s but its origins lie further back in time. The WTC was the offspring of an unusual public agency called the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PA) which was founded in 1921. 'To understand the World Trade Center," Angus Gillespie argues, "we first have to understand the Port Authority, the organization which built it. It is a complex story of money and politics, law and engineering, public service and personal pride." The story begins more than 100 years ago.

In the nineteenth century, as the United States expanded rapidly in the years before the Civil War, New York became the nation's commercial hub, economic marketplace and immigrant gateway. Thanks to its deep natural harbor, the city also was the nation's leading port. By 1860, two-thirds of America's imports and one-third of its exports traveled through the Port of New York. But the development was lopsided. Access to the harbor was through the Hudson River which separates New York and New Jersey. Most of the wharves and piers were built on the New York side, but most of the railroads terminated on the New Jersey side. Thus goods had to be shuttled

by ferry or lighter from one side of the Hudson to the other. This was inefficient, inconvenient and time-consuming. "It was not a rational plan," says Gillespie; "it was just the way things evolved."

It was also a source of commercial friction between New York and New Jersey. Thus the PA was established in 1921 to settle disputes between the two states and facilitate the transportation of goods and people across the Hudson River. Originally, it was supposed to build infrastructure like bridges and tunnels; later its mandate was interpreted more broadly to include building a world trade center. The PA could expand its activities because it was created as a public authority, an independent agency beyond local political influence. Thus the PA was insulated from the usual urban corruption; but placing it beyond the reach of local politicians also put it beyond the reach of the public. As former New York Governor Mario Cuomo explained, a public authority like the PA was "something above democracy, absolutely, that's why it was invented by politicians, to keep people away from the operation, and to insulate the politicians."

After World War Two, it became clear that America's economic future lay in international commerce. The original idea for a WTC emerged in 1946 when the United States assumed a leading role in the reconstruction of Europe. In anticipation of increased transatlantic trade, the New York State legislature set up the World Trade Corporation to study the feasibility of a trade center in Manhattan. Gillespie notes, "There was a growing realization that New York City was the home to many corporate headquarters that generated paperwork reflecting the enormous movement of goods not only within North America but throughout the world. Put simply, the proposed trade center would be a place for the exchange of paper." Already, the function of the PA was being expanded from building bridges to pushing paper. From there it was but a short step to entering the real estate market and building a skyscraper to end all skyscrapers.

The two key figures in creating the World Trade Center were Austin Tobin and David Rockefeller. Tobin joined the PA in 1927 and was appointed its executive director in 1942. He was a skilful and autocratic administrator who assembled an efficient and loyal staff that was responsible for the successful development and expansion of the three large New York-area airports over the next two decades. David Rockefeller, the youngest of five brothers in one of America's richest families, headed the powerful Chase Manhattan Bank. In the early Fifties, he decided to build a new sixty-story Chase Manhattan Bank Tower near Wall Street. It was a brave decision because at that time lower Manhattan was a rundown area of older commercial buildings housing small businesses and factories. To protect his

investment, Rockefeller established a new business organization, the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association (DLMA), to promote new real estate construction—and raise real estate values — in the shabby neighborhood. In 1958 the DMLA sponsored a study to plan the revival of lower Manhattan. In 1960 when the plan was unveiled, it included a proposal for the World Trade Center. At this time Rockefeller persuaded Tobin that the proposed WTC would be good for the city and good for the PA.

But it was a controversial decision for many reasons. First of all, it put the publicly funded PA in the real estate business competing with powerful private developers. Second, it was part of a larger plan to renovate older neighborhoods that were visually shabby but socially viable and economically successful. Eric Darton notes, "For more than two decades, well into the 1970s, large sections of American cities where properties were deemed 'undervalued' had become fair game for federally subsidized clearance and redevelopment plans. In many cases, these areas included viable—even vibrant —residential, industrial, and business districts." In the late nineteenth century, the future site of the WTC had included a large settlement of Arab immigrants called the "Syrian Quarter," which was a vital center of small-scale commercial activity. In the 1930s, it became the hub of the city's electronics trade, known as "Radio Row." Lower Manhattan was not derelict; it was simply "underdeveloped" by David Rockefeller's standards.

In fact, Rockefeller and the DMLA had a grand vision of the future city. It involved an ambitious plan to transform New York from an industrial to a post-industrial city. In the 1950s, New York had a varied economy involving commerce, manufacturing, shipping and services. In 1959 there were still 991,000 manufacturing jobs in the city employing mainly blue-collar workers. Rockefeller's urban vision did not include a large manufacturing sector, an active port or blue-collar workers. Instead he envisaged a post-industrial urban economy based on a dynamic financial, service and commercial sector with an expanded white-collar office work force. Pundits called this new economy FIRE, which stood for Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate. As Michael Tomasky explains, "to a considerable extent, the city's manufacturing decline was planned by people who believed that the city's future would be bound up in finance, insurance, and real estate."

Whatever else one might think, Rockefeller's plan worked. By the 1970s, the number of manufacturing jobs in the city was reduced to 553,000. Today there are under 300,000. What impact the elimination of so many manufacturing jobs will have on the future economy of New York is still to be determined. Moreover, the city's overall economy was gravely wounded

by September 11. Just the removal of 260,000 tons of debris at Ground Zero cost 5 billion dollars. The estimated cost of the disaster is 34 billion dollars in property damage and 10000 lost jobs. The negative impact on tourism hurt not only hotels and restaurants but theaters and museums as well. Unemployment climbed to 8 percent and may reach 10 percent. Recent reports suggest that New York's FIRE-based economy is under siege as the city undergoes the worst economic crisis since the 1970s when it faced bankruptcy.

As plans for the projected WTC moved forward in 1962, Austin Tobin and the PA began the arduous task of finding clients for the giant new complex. This was not easy in a city that already had unused office space. At this point, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller came to the aid of his younger brother, David. Nelson announced that the State of New York would concentrate many of its offices there, thus saving the project from the embarrassing spectre of too many vacancies. No wonder that when the project was completed, critics saw it as a Rockefeller family venture to enhance the Chase Manhattan Bank Tower and thus they dubbed the twin towers "David" and "Nelson."

Now the task fell to Tobin to find a suitable architect and here he made a surprising choice. Minoru Yamasaki was a Japanese-American architect based in the Middle West. "In the end, Tobin delivered the World Trade Center into the hands of a kindred spirit: an ambitious climber with the soul of an engineer," says Eric Darton uncharitably. "From Yamasaki's drawing boards emerged a heroic, disastrous attempt to reconcile the real estate imperatives of his client, Austin Tobin, with the sculptural aesthetics of his guiding spirit, Mies van der Rohe." Mies had built twin apartment towers on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive in 1951 that might have served as Yamasaki's inspiration. Strangely enough, Yamasaki had designed one giant project before, the massive Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis. Like many similar housing projects built in the postwar period, it turned out to be a disaster. On July 15, 1972, while the WTC was under construction, municipal demolition experts imploded Pruitt-Igoe as thousands of former residents of the dismal project cheered. The WTC was not the first Yamasaki project to be blown up.

But to be fair to Yamasaki, the idea of building the world's tallest building was not his. Originally, the tower was planned at eighty stories but the figure was raised as a marketing device in a highly competitive market. The planners thought that the tallest building in the world would attract tenants. The result was a monstrous complex covering forty hectares and comprising one million square meters of office space. Or almost twice as

much floor space as in the Pentagon. "With the World Trade Center, the skyscraper mutated into a creature of a fundamentally different species," says Eric Darton. "The trade center's scale and form had exploded the structure beyond any relationship to its surroundings. Its proportions simply gave people nothing in which they could recognize a human referent."

Criticism rained down on the project from all sides. First there were charges of simple graft. Second, there were skyrocketing costs. From an original estimate of $350 million in January 1964, costs rose to $525 million in September 1965, and to $575 million in January 1967. The final cost was, as some critics had predicted, $1 billion. Environmentalists also pointed out that there were no light switches in the towers so that tenants were compelled to waste electricity. But the primary criticism was aesthetic: the project was monstrous, out of human scale. "There is the fascination of the towers' ugliness," noted the architectural critic Wolf von Eckhardt. "Man's tallest buildings to date defy their surroundings, man's most wondrous, skyscraping community." According to Michael Tomasky: "to say that the towers were a symbol that New Yorkers were particularly proud of would be to stretch the point. As is well known, the World Trade Center was unloved by architecture critics and by New Yorkers in general." Perhaps a more balanced estimate was made recently by a New York architect, Michael Sorkin, in *Starting from Zero*. "It was hard not to have mixed feelings about the Trade Center. Their blankness and enormity were horrible and wonderful," he writes. "The towers' artistic aspirations were derived from the excesses of 'minimalism,' from the notion that the larger and more simplified the work, the more minimal, and therefore the greater its content. As the largest minimalist objects on the planet, flaunting the idea of artistic singularity by their monumental duplication, the World Trade Center surely obtained some version of an almost totally deracinated sublime."

Now that this "unloved" landmark is gone, what of the future? The prize-winning design for the defunct site, which includes a memorial park and a 1776-foot tower, is the work of Daniel Libeskind, the brilliant Polish-Jewish-American architect who came to the United States as an immigrant in 1959. With its construction, the Manhattan skyline will be transformed once again, thus both closing a tragic chapter in the city's history and opening up a new and hopefully brighter chapter in the new millennium. But Libeskind's visionary project will always live in the shadow of the old skyscraper. As Eric Darton observed prophetically in 1999, in some sense, those critics who praised the WTC twin towers as "the first buildings of the twenty-first century" were correct. "The problem was that they couldn't know what the twenty-first century was going to be about."