

10/26 A fellow who, in the Old Days would've been called a sandwich man stands on the corner of 31st and Sixth. But his signs aren't draped, in the grand tradition, fore and aft. Instead he wears a shoulder harness, like something out of a circus act, with wooden poles supporting a bright red placard over his head, its bold white letters high enough to be easily read above the passing throng. But his message doesn't say EAT AT JOE'S or 3-PIECE SUITS FOR LESS AT MOE'S, or some such slogan of a bygone day, rather LEARN DIGITAL MEDIA. Yeah, yeah, that's the ticket.

For you, this discovery is a biggie. Maybe it's objectively a biggie. Over the last few days, the prospect of Merrill Lynch's move to midtown has buzzed through your mind, stirring up a host of thoughts about the under-history, the urban tectonics of the split in Manhattan's central business district. It was only late this afternoon, though, when you saw Gwen off at Penn Station, on her way upstate for the weekend, that you clearly identified a key piece of your city's ongoing puzzle – one which has been hidden all along in plain view.

One flight down, in the subterranean cavern of the station's main concourse, the human population distills into two basic categories: the first consists of people moving as quickly as possible, rushing headlong for their trains, or else having arrived, bolting toward the exits, frantic to escape. Those in the second category stand like cattle, eyes fixed on the Departures board hoping that the next flash of information will tell them their track number and generally blocking the movements of those in the first category. And it was in this latter group that you found yourself today, attempting not to get in folks' way while attending to the big black oracle hanging from the ceiling, its too-bright LCD readouts setting off in you a vague nostalgia for the obsolete, pre-digital

click-clack sort of sign.

In clock time, you'd only been waiting there a few minutes. Yet very quickly a kind of physical despair set in. Part of this had to do with your reaction to being in a passive position unmediated by any sense of agency or momentum. And another element lay in the whole crushed and flattened-out scale of the chamber, which felt oppressive, reminiscent of the subterranean mall at the WTC. Your eye cast about for some distraction and lit upon a big framed photograph bolted to a support column: a black and white exterior shot of the old Penn Station in its heyday. What a temple of transport this place once was! A veritable Parthenon of choo-coos. And a nexus too, a point of confluence. What came clear to you in that moment was the degree to which the coming of the railroad allowed midtown – like a celestial body bent on establishing itself as the center of a new solar system – to tear immense quantities of urban energy away from the ancient harbor district where the city was born.

To this day, much evidence of this cataclysm remains, written in architectural forensics. It was, of course possible for a race of nihilistic planners and developers to demolish the steel, glass and granite Penn. Which they did in 1964, the year after you and Bea moved into Penn South. But rail tunnels aren't portable, so a new station, designed more or less along the lines of an immense bus terminal was built in the same location and forced into an unhappy ménage à trois with a sports arena cum concert hall and an office complex. Happily, just across Eighth Avenue, the magnificent General Post Office, built to architecturally compliment the station still survives. But architectural virtues aside, it was the proto-clustering of two key urban functions several miles north of the Wall Street and the harbor that allowed *Neither snow nor rain...* to symbolically eclipse *Send us your poor....*

The same thing occurred a few blocks up and over east where within spitting distance of the NY Central Railroad's terminus – soon to be replaced by Grand Central Station – the Public Library rose on the site of the old city reservoir. Collectively these powerful new civic entities served as cornerstones for a burgeoning northern CBD, replete with skyscrapers anchored in bedrock that cooperatively rose close to the surface just as it did on the southern end of the island. All of which happened about a decade after the political unification of the city in 1898.

More or less contemporaneously too came the proliferation of mass transit systems, conduits via which a working population could converge in midtown on weekday mornings and be dispersed to their greater metropolitan homes by nightfall. Over time, the rift that opened up with the establishment of midtown as a transit hub around which major public institutions, grand hotels, clubs, and posh emporia would constellate, became a chronic and accepted condition of the city's mode of operation. Despite being separated by a significant distance, the two CBDs remain divided yet cinched together, something like conjoined twins.

This metaphor, now that you come to think about it, makes the original design of the World Trade Center seem all more bizarre, as though the dual towers signified, on some no doubt unconscious level, the geographic schizophrenia within the city's commercial life. An ironic thing too, in that, for a time, the WTC strategically shifted the power dynamic back in favor of downtown. Vanquished in two strokes, the long-reigning primacy of the Empire State, whose owner, Harry Helmsley, kicked like a fly-bit mule at the prospect of his flagship's usurpation as tallest building and therefore transmission aerial of choice, and spent millions on a futile campaign to scale the trade center down.

For their part, the brothers Rockefeller – banker David and NY State governor Nelson – bound up as they were in downtown “revitalization,” tugged the family’s resources southward in support of older commercial holdings and thus away from the eponymous Center their father had built in the very midst of midtown.

But the kicker, the mind-blowing part long obscured by the twin dramas of the towers’ rise and fall, is that the gravest and most enduring consequence of building them downtown was the permanent enmeshment of New York State in the Lower Manhattan real estate game. This began in the early ’60s, when David had already gambled the farm on a new corporate headquarters for Chase on Liberty Street. Then Nelson, in support of brother David and the family bank, caused Albany to buy in bigtime. Nelson’s support of and resulting subsidies for the trade center amounted, essentially, to the leveraged buyout of Olde Manhattan by the statehouse. Or, looked at in another way, the financial district became a kind of colonial outpost of the State. A striking symbol of which is that in 1966, the trade center site legally ceased to be New York City property and became the sovereign domain of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, a corporation under the jurisdiction of the two states’ legislatures and governors. And so it remains to this day.

What then does this imply about the present moment? And what’s next? Well, for starts, once one is aware of the significance of a CBD bifurcated along the fault lines of city and state, large scale development and political maneuvers within the city may be more readily grasped, including the dynamics that increasingly transform the face of Brooklyn. It becomes possible now to make sense – in terms that reach beyond formulaic Democrat vs. Republican antagonisms – of the strategic interests that underlie a host of greater and lesser urban powerplays and to recognize in them the

machinations of a city vs. state real estate game. It sheds light, for example, on the motives behind Sheldon Silver, the State Assembly Speaker, who in recent years has scotched a number of Bloomberg-hyped midtown initiatives, including a west side stadium and the Congestion Pricing plan – this latter being a real-estate wolf in Green clothing. Conversely one recognizes in the mayor's apparent indifference to the fate of downtown in general and Ground Zero in particular, the coded behavior of a competing interest.

The more one considers the ramifications of the primal split in the CBD and the vying contenders, banks and developers not least, entrenched in one camp or another and sometimes playing both ends against the middle, the more legible the strange lopsided energetics of the city become. As with a pair of actors each wearing one end of a horse costume, it's impossible for an entity without an integrated anatomy to walk straight – even if its constituents don't sabotage one another, and are not deeply corrupted into the bargain. A systemic disequilibrium such as this one, particularly in times of arrant opportunism and economic desperation, precipitates realignment upon realignment, in evermore ridiculous bids to somehow keep moving forward. The moves of the crippled creature are all misalignments really – the ungainly shifting offers endless opportunities for parasitical greed and favors the most power-driven organs of the plutocratic structure. And all this without even mentioning the role of the Feds. Or the trickle-down toxicity that fosters only the worst, most venal sorts of I'm Alright Jackism at street level.

And lo, location, as ever, says a mouthful. Call it an accident if you like, but today the only working port facility on the island resides in midtown: an undersized dock for gargantuan cruise ships – that's what's left of once-maritime Manhattan.

Alas for Bloomie, he's got a nasty Uncle Sheldon to contend with. And his mayoralty was born, post 9/11, with an endlessly irritating Silverstein shoved in its mouth. But perhaps Larry, master insinuator that he is, has wormed his way down to lodge in hizzoner's kidneys?

But this too shall pass – this particular phase in the ever-bolluxed-up city, the warring states within it and undermining forces from without. It will pass the way of the mighty Penn Central Railroad and vanish as, soon afterward, its fantastic temple did.

Too deep in your reverie to notice Gwen's track number flash onto the board. But she spotted it, sharp-eyed girl that she is, and together you started moving with a swarm of folks toward the escalator down to her platform. Then she fell into the queue with some kids she knows who were heading for the same retreat so you handed off her little rolling valise, said goodbye and, foregoing the up escalator bounded two steps at a time in the direction of the waning daylight.

At the corner of Eighth and 31st, one of those weird static moments occurred in the traffic, so you were able to cross diagonally southwest, with the red light flashing but no oncoming cars, and even had the leisure to read, albeit at an oblique angle, much of the saying carved on the lintel above the columns and beneath the pediment of the GPO. The last words you couldn't make out, but then, they're engraved in memory.
...nor gloom of night shall stay these couriers from lifting up their lamps beside the golden door.

10/27 a.m. An enormous sense of let-down in the wake of your revelations about the city. Which seizes you as you head across 21st Street, en seul, toward the peace demonstration. Just behind you comes a male voice – German? – speaking on a cell

phone. "Please tell the others to come because there is work to be done. The work should not fall on to the shoulders of one individual." This last word he pronounces as "in-di-wi-du-wil." Which somehow lends the sentiment gravitas. Is he heading to the demo like you, or is this about a business meeting?

Despite intermittent downpours, it's by far the most spirited demo in recent memory: a good walking pace down Broadway with no sense of being hemmed in. Plenty of chanting, clever and mordant placards, a rolling cage containing "prisoners" in orange boiler suits representing those held in Guantánamo. Still you feel strange to the core, utterly isolated in this crowd in your city, cast into a space of internal displacement that tugs down the corners of your mouth. Go figure. You spend a fair amount of time alone, so what makes this version of that state particularly distressing? If you were home, you'd curl up on the bed, close your eyes tightly and hope the pain lets up soon. But here, all you can do is breathe. Take the next step.

Drifting within the mix, you find yourself now among high school students, a pro-Palestinian cadre, a contingent of SEIU workers, some Vietnam vets, a dozen Long Island women dressed in pink, a Samba-ish drum corps, and some folks – moms, pops and kids – holding a banner that reads Bergen County Military Families Against the War.

South of Houston, near Spring, the rain which has held off for several blocks comes suddenly down in buckets. A tremendous cheer from the already-soaked crowd, whoops and yells as though it's a kind of baptism. By the time the march hits Foley Square, you're near the head of it. Barricades line the entrance to the Square, and ranks of cops. Don't want to get boxed in, so you veer off and stand along the sidelines. A

police captain, a head taller than his minions, raises his bullhorn. "Congratulations," he says, "you've reached your destination. If your bladder's weak like mine is, you may want to head over to the far side of the square where we've set up some portosans. It's about a mile and half you've walked down Broadway and you've burned off plenty of calories. So if you feel like dessert tonight, go ahead. I want to say that I admire you for coming out in the rain to demonstrate for what you believe in. I wish you peace."

Hearing this, the guy standing next to you seems just as stunned as you are. Having searched enroute among hundreds of faces, and finding so many countenances with familiar features that somehow don't add up to a person you know, it takes you a beat to realize this fellow in the red poncho as Charles, a friend from ages past. He's alone too. You walk northeast together, find a pair of free stools at B&H and order matzoh ball soup with buttered challah.

10/28 Dinner at Shah's with Katie, Tom and Maureen, Teddy and Ladan after which T & M, no longer west-siders, much less Chelseaites, take a cab in the direction of 10128. Walk homeward in company with T & L. Emerging from Madison Square Park you see deployed before you a panoply of fire trucks, cop cars, emergency vehicles of all sorts, TV vans with their corkscrew aerials, even the Salvation Army Disaster Relief-mobile. *Collapsed building, south side of the street*, so says a video cameraman, in response to T.'s question. The fellow points languidly, enuied out by the no-action of it all. Cops won't let you get closer then the corner of 24th and Fifth. Nothing much visible the from behind the yellow tape.

This a.m. when you bike by, the street's still closed off, but down the block a crane and dozer pose next to a fairly tame mound of rubble that's spilled out onto the

sidewalk from between a gap in the building facades.

Fragments of a story buzz gnatlike through the mediated air: a hundred and something year old building, either three, four or five stories high – take your pick – once a trysting place for Evelyn “I Could Love a Million Girls” Nesbit, and the soon-to-be-late Stanford White. Fast forward to abandonment after a fire four years ago by its owner, a Floridian mobster-cum-attorney once indicted by Giuliani. The building’s last known identity: Hotel La Semana.

Who warehouses a property like that in this market, and in the Flatiron to boot? And where will all its displaced rats live now? Salvation Army shelters? Move in with relatives? God bless the child...

DOB says it’ll be done demolishing this afternoon. Thus passes 22 West 24th. Hiccup and move on.

Who can retell what never befell us?

10/29 The category is: Best Actor in a Black Romantic Comedy Based on a Lost Book by Nostradamus. And the envelope please...

Times headline: *China Arrests 774 in Crackdown on Food and Drugs*. Now, given the summary nature of the legal mechanics of the People’s Republic, will the immensely popular international spectacle known as BODIES... the Exhibition – devoted to satisfying our post-Mengele fascination with the revealed anatomy beneath an Other’s skin – gain a host of new objects, and subjects, for its very exemplary type of pornography?

One can already view BODIES... the Exhibition in Prague or Lisbon, Las Vegas bien sur, Pittsburgh or Buenos Aires, among other metropolises. And should one find oneself, Whitman-like, tacking through the turbulent seas of Lower Manhattan humanity, one could step, metaphorically, inside the tent and encounter a rare tribe of aesthetically-butchered Chinese cadavers on Fulton and Front Streets, once the heart of the ancient maritime city – now malled-out and cryogenically arrested in time and space. The South Street Seaport. The Body Electrocuted. Or simply shot. Step right up – only \$26 greenbacks – cheap at twice the price. And yes Virginia, there are teeshirts, mugs, paperweights, keychains. What, no mousepads – shame on them! Lampshades – why not?

But to what port of call will this new cargo of necrophile side show-fodder be shipped? Mogadishu, Kabul, Teheran, Grozny? Some newly booming town? O where in the big wide world will the bodies of these 774 soon-to-be-dead food and drug criminals come to rest?

Begin to read Fran's new book, *Bodies in Treatment*.

10/30 A scene out of a painting, not a movie. On 20th, between Fifth and Sixth, a backhoe lifts and drags a huge slab of pavement, must be six by six and shaped like a squared-off donut, leaving behind, in the center of the street, a pit that belches sulfurous vapor into the finally brisk fall air.

The jackhammer that perforated the slab loose lies in the gutter – a fallen soldier in an endless war. A crew in orange hard hats bustles about the backhoe and the dumptruck into whose hopper the slab is now consigned. Look closer as it's

lowered: the circumference of the hole is steaming too.

What is Bush but the individual manifestation of an enormous and deep collective corruption of the spirit? And so we're going to exchange him for... what?

This, says Katie, is a time of cholera.