

The Janus Face of Architectural Terrorism: Minoru Yamasaki, Mohammad Atta and Our World Trade Center

...How cold it is, if I ascend still further—it is as though I were in the Alps. I attain the region of the snows. Moral vegetation gradually vanishes, the flower of national consciousness fades. It is a world caught in the sudden chill of egoism and panic....If I mount one degree higher, even fear has ceased, and it is the pure selfishness of the calculator without fatherland that I discover....No more men, only figures....A true glacier abandoned by nature....May I be permitted to come down now, the cold is too great up here for me, I can no longer breathe.

—Jules Michelet, *Le peuple*, I, 8, 1846

Nearly ten years ago, in what seems from today's vantage point like a relative age of innocence, I began assembling the materials for a book on New York's World Trade Center. My strategy concentrated on observing these buildings as artifacts of a social moment that, in the developed world, coincided with the transition from industrial to information age values. For New York City, the rise of the WTC in the late 1960s marked the threshold between a mixed economy and an emergent monoculture of finance, insurance and real estate. In their immensity and formal relation to one another, the towers autographed the skyline with an emblematic portal between these eras. They also announced the culmination of elite regional planning strategies several generations in the making and celebrated, even as Fortune 500 companies fled the city, the emergence of Corporate New York triumphantly astride the ruins of manufacturing and lesser commerce.

First proposed by the banker David Rockefeller in the late 1950s as part of a broader Lower Manhattan real estate scheme, the trade towers were planned and built during the 1960s and '70s by a public agency, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. As they rose at the Hudson's River edge, the authority's director Austin Tobin described them as a "vertical port." Though Tobin's assertion was disingenuous at best, it is true that the advent of the WTC coincided with the eclipse of New York as the world's premier seaport. The excavations for the foundation of what the PA called "the

first buildings of the 21st century" literally buried the piers at the southern edge of Manhattan and ended 300 years of maritime culture there.

Though my research centered on tracing the political and economic trajectories that gave the trade towers their distinct form, I also found myself fascinated by the language and thought patterns of the men who had not merely imagined these buildings, but engineered them and harnessed the will of thousands of others to bring them into material existence. I was powerfully struck by the abstract nature of the planners' and architects' thinking, their willingness to reduce lived actuality to a set of disembodied quantities. And so I wrote:

...You need only to stand for a moment in Austin Tobin plaza to become immediately and keenly aware of how [architect Minoru] Yamasaki's abstract sculptural ethos achieved a kind of chilling perfection in his World Trade Center design. Here you find yourself in the presence of two monumental structures whose formal relationship gives us no indication of their purpose or intent. You know they are office buildings, yet their design makes it nearly impossible to imagine that they are full of *people*. It is at this point that – even without invoking the optical trick of standing at a towers' corner and looking upward – you realize the trade towers disappear as sites of human habitation and reassert their power at the level of an esthetic relationship. And it is through recognizing this process that you may become uncomfortably aware of a kindred spirit linking the apparently polar realms of skyscraper terrorist and skyscraper builder.

This analogy between those who seek to destroy the structures the latter thought it rational and desirable to build becomes possible by shifting focus momentarily to the shared, underlying predicate of their acts. To attempt creation or destruction on such an immense scale requires both bombers and master-builders to view living processes in general, and social life in particular, with a high degree of abstraction. Both must undertake a radical distancing of themselves from the flesh and blood experience of mundane existence "on the ground." Gaston Bachelard observed in *The Poetics of Space* that attaining such a state requires one to manufacture a

"daydream": a reverie in which one observes others as they "move about irrationally 'like ants.'" Separated from "the restless world" of the here and now, the daydream world offers up the "impression of domination at little cost."

For Bachelard, the design of the tall building demands, as the price of its extreme verticality, the sacrifice of a "dream cellar." The skyscraper fails to make room for the volatile urges that raised it to be explored, acknowledged and integrated. It remains, in Bachelard's term, "oneirically incomplete" – robbed of space for the language of the unconscious. Thus our city of towers stands condemned to communicate only one side of the dialogue – it transmits messages of a "purely *exterior*" value alone.

Through building and inhabiting our towers, we push ourselves toward a break in connection with the stuff of our own humanness. For Bachelard, the skyscrapers' elevators "do away with the heroism of stair climbing. ... Everything about [them] is mechanical and, on every side, intimate living flees." For the terrorist and the skyscraper builder alike, day-to-day existence shrinks to insignificance – reality distills itself to the instrumental use of physical forces in service of an abstract goal. Engulfed by their daydream, they are "no longer aware of the outside universe."¹

When these words were published in 1999, several reviewers – including some who praised my book – took me to task for making such a comparison. Perhaps they found the equation facile, or else were not prepared to allow that the narrow separation between the two mindsets made them uncomfortable. So on this point in particular, I found myself feeling that I had climbed out on a very long limb where I could expect precious little company.

Then arrived, literally on my doorstep, a hideous confirmation of my thesis in the form of an article in the October 10, 2001 *New York Times*. The story concerned the transformation of Mohammad Atta from "a shy young man" into the "mastermind"

¹ Eric Darton, *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center*. (Basic Books, 1999), pp. 118-19.

behind the destruction of the World Trade Center. It was Atta, apparently, who led the team of hijackers and himself piloted one of the planes that brought the towers down - though the *Times*, stuttering through his unhappy Odyssey, could not bring itself report him a suicide in so many words. Born in Egypt and graduated from Cairo University in 1980, Atta was awarded a scholarship from Hamburg Technical University, and, upon receiving his architecture degree, went to work for a German urban planning firm, Plankontor. There he "impressed his co-workers with his diligence and the careful elegance of his drafting." But "instead of becoming an architect or urban planner, Mr. Atta became an Islamic terrorist."

Based on the *Times's* biography, a number of comparisons may be drawn between the lives of Mohammad Atta and the WTC's chief architect Minoru Yamasaki, familiarly known as Yama. As boys, both were dominated by autocratic fathers whose professional aspirations for their sons sometimes took the form of devastating psychological cruelty. Both Yama and Atta found themselves alienated within their respective cultures. The son of Japanese immigrants, Yamasaki grew up in the Pacific Northwest where he endured the vicious racism of the WWII era. Even in later years, after he had become a successful architect, Yamasaki faced open discrimination when he tried to buy a house in suburban Michigan. Mr. Atta reportedly felt alienated in Germany, but even more so when he returned to Egypt and found that in Cairo, urban renewal amounted to knocking down poor neighborhoods in order to, as a German classmate put it, "make a Disneyworld out of it." And so he fled back to Germany and, reportedly, into the arms of the jihad.²

Whatever the value of such psychological profiling, the parallels between Yamasaki and Atta would seem a kind of "DNA match" between members of the same highly disciplined profession exercising their skills at the highest level to opposing purposes. Bluntly put, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey hired Minoru Yamasaki to erect their towers. A generation later, Osama bin Laden (we presume) contracted Atta to unbuild them. Though he cannot be called the trade towers' client of record, David Rockefeller, self-proclaimed advocate of "catalytic bigness," found

² "The Mastermind; A Portrait of the Terrorist: From Shy Child to Single-Minded Killer." Jim Yardley with Neil MacFarquhar and Paul Zeilbauer, *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2001, B9:1.

articulators of his vision in Tobin and, by extension, Yamasaki. We will probably never know the identities of those who stood in the shadows behind bin Laden when he signed on Mohammad Atta.

Examining the nearly forensic interlock between Yamasaki and Atta may be useful in comparing the building of the WTC and its destruction as enactments of polarized daydreams of domination. Whether a master plan entails casting away stones or gathering stones together, the project rests upon the creation of an abstract, quantitative logic that supposes itself to operate on a higher plane than that inhabited by the human material beneath it. You can package 50,000 people in a 10 million square foot office block, accounting for weight and windloads and, as Yamasaki did, proclaim it a "symbol of world peace." Sure, no problem. And on the other end, you can calculate the structural properties of the target, the projectile's velocity on impact, the necessary payload of jet fuel. No problem. You just do the math.

Now it seems to me that recognizing the downside of our capacity for certain modes of thinking should not lead us to reflexively renounce or suppress them. We might rather, and to our benefit, enfold our abstract and quantitative tendencies within a wider awareness – one which permits bold imaginative leaps, yet awakens us from our daydreams when their enactment pushes us past the point where we can recognize the human form, or perceive the existence of concrete human needs.

It seems a particularly difficult task, in the aftermath of the horrific deaths of thousands and the deeply disconcerting failure of what seemed like so much enduring, reliable mass, to contemplate the building of the World Trade Center itself as a destructive act – specifically, an attack planned by the city's oligarchs and carried out with the general consent of its populace. Yet this aspect of the towers needs to be integrated into our historical awareness if we hope not just to rebuild the structures, but to re-imagine what it is to be New Yorkers and citizens of the developed world.

Until September 11, 2001 the parallel monoliths of the WTC stood hyper-visible against the skyline, yet remained largely unknown, even to their inhabitants. Less clear was the degree to which the towers were artificial implants in the city fabric: moored in Manhattan schist like any other skyscraper, yet not *of* New York. Beyond their architectural design, much of this inorganic, incongruous quality derived from the peculiar constitution of the Port Authority as a sovereign legal entity whose powers

trumped those of the municipality on whose land they were constructed. This political asymmetry allowed for the condemnation of the trade center site under eminent domain and resulted in the legally sanctioned displacement of an entire commercial community – hundreds of people engaged in scores of small and medium-sized businesses collectively known as Radio Row.

Some of the most viscerally affecting primary documents I encountered in the course of my research were the PA's own files detailing the particulars of the condemned buildings located on what would become the trade center's footprint. The records made punctilious note of the specifications of the structure to be pulled down and the price paid to the owner, generally far below market value. For one four-story loft building on Greenwich Street, indistinguishable from nearby survivors now converted to luxury condominiums, the PA paid the owner \$16,000. Stapled to the cover sheet for each property was a snapshot of the building taken just prior to its demolition. Thus encountered, more than thirty years after the fact, this collection of individual records testified, with a kind of breathtaking directness, not just to the particularity of what had been demolished, but also to the methodical abstractedness with which the agency undertook its mission. Now, given the destruction of the trade center and with it, doubtless, much of the PA archives, who knows what has become of these documents?

This, in any case, was the manner whereby New York City lost jurisdiction over sixteen acres of, arguably, some of its most valuable land and suffered the obliteration of a significant portion of its historic Lower Manhattan streetscape. Expropriation of the property by the Port Authority also meant that what the city received annually in lieu of taxes represented only a small fraction of the amount a commercial developer would have had to ante up. Just before demolitions on the WTC site began in 1966, the New York City Planning Commission, never the most robust agent of democratic decision-making, found its role relegated to rubber-stamping Austin Tobin's fait accompli.

Nor, in constructing the trade center was the PA obliged by law to comply with New York City building code, an issue which, given the enormity of the structural failure and loss of life, will surely resonate for years to come. What kind of radical disconnect was operating in the minds of those who decided to substitute a double

layer of sheetrock for the standard concrete as fireproofing for the towers' core columns? Less durable, but cheaper and faster. There, in one stroke, went the traditional four-hour window in the firefighters' manual for high-rise blazes. And a sprinkler system – another safety commonplace – was ruled out because of the weight of the water tanks. In the end, New York ended up with twin buildings so tall that, under optimal conditions, it took forty-five minutes to descend them on foot. Of course one can conceive of such things, but would it not be pure, enacted domination fantasy to actually build them? How far does a structure have to veer from fundamental considerations of human life and safety, before we can recognize it as a manifestation of terrorism?

Today, in the wake of the World Trade Center's violent unbuilding, in the presence of the 1.5 million tons of wreckage the city has been left with, including 200,000 tons of structural steel, six acres of marble – or on a more palpable scale, 40,000 doorknobs and 5,000 bathroom soap dispensers – it is possible to grasp the incalculably great price we pay for ceding our political wills to sovereign authorities with big plans for us little people. We start paying it the moment we allow ourselves to be abstracted out of our day-to-day lives and identify as our own the voice that tells us it is our destiny as individuals and a culture, to inhabit an empyreal realm where we may possess "domination at little cost." This delusory state was one face of the terrorism built into the World Trade Center. On September 11, the other face became visible with jaw-dropping suddenness.

I am not making an argument for going backwards to some presumably more humane urban past. Nor am I saying: "Death to the skyscraper!" – though I think its American incarnation has probably come and gone. What I am advocating is moving forward differently, into a city and a world in which our abstract thoughts become a function of our integrative capacities and where we plan ourselves *into* our structures, rather than attempting to "humanize" the distorted results of our, or others', omnipotent yearnings.

A few days after the WTC towers fell in upon themselves, I sat with a friend at our local coffee shop in Chelsea. Already the energies of our vastly powerful nation were driving toward war. Nonetheless, we speculated on his most recent daydream: a futuristic grooved railway - a supply and trade route from New York City, up across

Canada, over the Bering Straits, through Asia, into the heart of Europe and south into Africa. Our talk grew animated as we elaborated the idea of a massive, international public works project, linking a host of autonomous, yet interdependent localities. What would it feel like, we wondered, to live in a city at once more deeply connected to itself and to other places on the earth? But since he is an economist and craftsman and I am a writer and a teacher, we let our conversation go at that. Parting to head our separate ways, we agreed that in the near term, New York City should relearn how to build good ships. After all, the harbor is still there. And the city's lifeblood was always the sea.

We humans are born creatures of the earth and air, capable of functioning with our heads in the clouds - so long as our feet remain on the ground. Rising toward the stratosphere, though, we feel we have broken free of gravity. When that narcotic sense of weightlessness possesses us, it is not long before our ascent finds its opposite number in the terror of the fall.

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