

Brave New World?: New York City's Journey Toward and Away from Its Twin Towers

Eric Darton

Saturday, October 6, 2001

The World Trade Center itself was an assault on the City of New York. In the mid 1950s there was a perception that Lower Manhattan had never come back up from the Depression. Property values, unlike those in midtown, had not risen back to where they ought to be according to people who were invested in Lower Manhattan. And one of the major families and dynasties that was heavily invested in Lower Manhattan was the Rockefeller family.

David Rockefeller, who was then the head of Chase Manhattan Bank, made a very bold move in the mid 50s. He decided to roll the big dice on building the first modern skyscraper in Lower Manhattan. It's called One Chase Plaza and as far as I know it was one of the first super-block structures down there. And David Rockefeller, unlike many of our post-planning real estate guys, had the Big Vision and one of his multipliers was a guy named Warren Linquist. David Rockefeller had these people called "multipliers." This was one of those beautiful moments when, like an atomic physicist or advanced mathematician, Rockefeller may have muttered this in his sleep or awakened briefly and then gone back to sleep and discovered his new theory when he woke up in the morning, and Linquist or some other multiplier, would go and multiply it. So Linquist said, "What's needed today in the 50s is catalytic bigness."

Those were his words, catalytic bigness, and this concept was multiplied by Liguist and others. And the idea behind this concept was that if you were to do big redevelopment you had to destroy the preexisting environment. Remember, this concept arose at the height of the urban renewal movement. U.S. cities were not flattened in WWII by air bombardment, U.S. cities were flattened after WWII by the U.S. government.

Rockefeller's idea of catalytic bigness was shared by a lot of people, but he came up with the slogan. He was an amazing guy, he still exists, he's still alive, we haven't heard him a lot in the press unfortunately, despite the fact, or because, the World Trade Center was his baby, and I would be interested to hear what he has to say about its destruction. He decided to manifest his idea in the form of something he called "The Billion Dollar Plan," tantamount to a hundred mega-ton plan for Lower Manhattan. He wanted to level every 19th century building south of Canal Street and build a gleaming corporate futuropolis.

David Rockefeller figured, "Look, I'm rolling all these dollars on Lower Manhattan. Let's have an upsurge on the whole market, let's really make this sing, from a real estate stand point. But on top of that, because I'm a Rockefeller, I'm going to propose this as a great public good!"

But Rockefeller's plan was not perceived as a great public good by the people whose buildings he planned to demolish. And what he had to do was take a step back and say, "You know, I could see why you think I might be interested in this, but there is a public service here. What we need here is a World Trade Center." David's World Trade Center was going to combine a lot of functions, it

was going to be a trade mart, it would incorporate the stock and commodities exchanges, all kinds of stuff. And his people, Skidmore Owings and Merrill drew up plans for a gorgeous thing that looked a lot like the UN and they wanted to land this thing basically right on top of where the South Street Seaport is today.

Rockefeller's Billion Dollar Plan was widely endorsed by many politicians in New York, but fundamentally it didn't go through as he proposed it, although it was widely lauded and particularly by the New York Times; the New York Times basically published his press releases verbatim. Which by the way they probably still would, because every now and then the Times does a profile on David Rockefeller pretending he has some really good new thing to say.

So next, I'll use a nice American metaphor, in order to get the game going, David Rockefeller took the football and passed it to his brother Nelson who lived in Albany, because Nelson was the governor of New York State and therefore controlled the more powerful half of the bi-state public corporation known as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. And Nelson came up with a plan to build the World Trade Center on the west side of Lower Manhattan in order to utilize the Port Authority's ability to raise bonds to fund the project. The Port Authority would build the World Trade Center in New York, and in exchange take over the bankrupt Hudson Manhattan Railroad, known then as the New Jersey Hudson Tubes, and now called the Path. And the part of the deal no one talked about publicly was that New Jersey got what was left of the Port of New York. Our regional port is now in Newark/Elizabeth, and there are a host of problems keeping it competitive with other ports, which I can't go into right here,

but that essentially have to do with the shallow depth of the ship channel through the Kill Van Kull being unable to accommodate the new generation of deep-draft superships – ships that could, however berth in Brooklyn if there were more robust port and freight handling facilities there.

Nelson and David were great deal makers. The first time they proposed building a World Trade Center they didn't think about New Jersey and they ran right into a wall. The second time they got hip and said, "We'll take over the Path, New Jersey, and you can bring your workers into New York." So David Rockefeller handed his great idea off to Nelson, and Nelson handed it over to Austin Tobin, the famously autocratic, and to some, visionary head at the Port Authority. I'm going to roll this thing back a moment to say the Port Authority was founded in 1921, ostensibly to oversee the health and welfare of the port of New York. The port wasn't in Elizabeth then, it was in New York. In fact the excavations from the World Trade Center physically buried the finger piers of Lower Manhattan.

So we are entering this threshold space, where, in my research, looking at these emblematic structures, I realized that fundamentally the Trade Center, when it was standing, was a gateway. And from a distance it looked like a gateway made by a race of giants. On one side of the gateway is a city that can manufacture, finance and transport things.

Before New York became a great financial center with gleaming towers moored in its bedrock, it was first a fishing village, and then a port, then the great port. Before the World Trade Center we had a city with an integrated economy,

including financial services— very important things. But after the World Trade Center's creation we have the information city: a city of abstract commodities, a city whose primary import is booze and export is wastepaper. That's what we do here; we also stare at monitors a lot.

Tobin decided to go ahead and build this thing because he came to envision it as a vertical port of the new service economy, and because he and the Port Authority never were interested in running the port. They were interested in the automotive future, bridges and tunnels and sexy stuff like that, mega-planning stuff. For them the port really was not that important in linking up Lower Manhattan to the rest of the world.

David and Nelson said, in essence, "Let's get the port out of Lower Manhattan and let's get industry out of Lower Manhattan and get it to New Jersey. Let's throw it away it to them. Let's decentralize all that funky stuff and bring more high finance into the financial core and expand the financial core."

So Tobin was like, "Wow, cool!" And the Port Authority, a public agency, the original model for all Roosevelt's alphabet agencies during the Depression, was basically hijacked by David and Nelson Rockefeller to become New York's largest real estate speculator. It's fabulous, it's a fabulous story, and I wish my nose hadn't led me to it. I honestly wish I was standing here talking about something else. But this is New York history, this horrible piece of destruction of these towers and the people in them, and we have to take it in, and we have to go on somehow.

Tobin hires his own guy, not one of the usual big named architects used by the Rockefellers in their other projects. This architect, named Minoru Yamasaki, really has the soul of an engineer. He's going to take a 16 acre footprint and he's going to somehow wrap 50,000 thousand people in 10 million square feet of office space, because the Port Authority figure they were need that much office space to offset the Path's losses.

By the way, the Port Authority never otherwise got involved in railroads of any kind because they just saw railroads as declass . No, you got to go for the big car thing, you know, the sprawl thing, that we're all decrying so much now. We talk about smart growth, yes these guys were into dumb growth. So they smartly grew what they called the first building of the Twenty-First Century, sort of the last one too, of their era, and they smartly called this "the Vertical Port." And what we ended up with after enormous human labor, in which 19 people actually died on the site, none of whom, interestingly enough, were the high steel workers. Fascinating, they knew how to build, those guys. We ended up with these buildings that we are all now mourning. Personally take the buildings. Give me back the 6,000 people; I'm not interested in buildings as martyrs.

But here we are, it's 1973 and the World Trade Center is a financial disaster from the get-go. Nelson Rockefeller pours 25,000 New York State office workers into Tower 2 to give the thing a rent base. Ultimately, it "succeeds" in some form. Eventually, the rentals for the World Trade Center came into the black. But because of the unique aspect of the Port Authority, (which, until Silverstein bought this thing this past summer, continued to be the owner and

manger of it), this building was really unlike anything else that have ever been done, because the Port Authority didn't have to borrow from conventional sources. It got all it's financing from bonds. This means that when you drive across the George Washington Bridge, you're paying off these bonds.

So what could they do when the Trade Center was bombed in 1993? They could just issue 800 million dollars in more bonds, to bring this thing back to class A office space, which of course they could never do because this was never built as a "smart building" in the first place.

That's how this thing came here, in a nutshell. It came here and we, like we do in New York, adapted. We ended up growing accustomed to it's face. When they were building these skeletons down there, people living in Lower Manhattan, the Tribeca pioneers, called towers 1 and 2 David and Nelson; see they got it. But no one knows that now. And no one remembers that one of the last really major public projects David Rockefeller was involved in was this big, fat book published by the Downtown Businessmen's Association, which he founded. He published the book in 1993, at the depth of the implosion of Lower Manhattan real estate values and a few months after the first attack on the World Trade Center. Here's a précis of what David had to say: "You know we should really take down all the early 20th century skyscrapers here. Just blow them all down, because they are not going to survive. The vacancy rate is so bad down here, let's just go for the modern buildings."

David's new idea was published not that many years ago, only eight years ago. The situation, in terms of real estate, was so bad that his new idea was

actually being considered as part of a plan. Amazing, amazing, amazing. How quickly we forget. Regarding the creative destruction of New York, New York Magazine just said, fairly reliably, that Manhattan changes its population by 20 percent every year. Not sure how they came by that, but it's an interesting concept to consider because of what it says about people's commitment to community here. I used to say to people, "If you don't like New York, wait five years, you may not like it better, but you are going to have a different city." We also have an incredible and unpredictable process going on in New York. So when people ask me what should we build down at the World Trade Center site, I say: let's not think site-specific. Let's think about what we need to know as a city, because this is an incredible opportunity to ask ourselves, what are we building and who are we building it for?

There have been enormous energies generated by and continuing to flow from this destruction in Lower Manhattan. I think we have a couple of choices of where that can go. We can put it into warfare. We can put it into tearing ourselves apart as a society. We can put it into leveling what's left of Afghanistan, after we funded the Taliban for all those years. Or we could do something interesting.

I propose something admittedly extremely utopian. If we are going to have globalism, let's not have several market centers warring with one another and calling it globalism, let's do it for real. Let's build a railroad from New York across Canada, across the Bering Straits, a new silk route down through Asia, to say Paris, could be Berlin or another city in Europe, but let's say Paris, with trunk

lines branching off everywhere else. Let's update some 19th century technology and really connect the world and see what happens. Don't use rails, use concrete grooves, all made out of local materials. Give local producers access to global markets. We might have to endure one, two, three generations worth of hits from

people who hate this country, but by then our country would have merged with the rest of the world and they with us. New Yorkers are natural experts at vernacular globalism – the righteous kind.

We could really work toward creating a global economy that functioned for people, as opposed to being engaged in a war by the First World against the Third World, which is what we've been doing. Then we might have built something amazing in a couple of generations from now, or even sooner. And if we dream for a year into that chasm in Lower Manhattan, maybe we'll figure out the right things to do with our city.