**Ode to Manhattan's Spires and Shards**
By ADALOUISE HUXTABLE
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# Ode to Manhattan's Spires and Shards

By ADALOUISE HUXTABLE

You meet the nicest people on demolition sites. Mostly photographers. If you laid all their film end to end it could tie the Battery in a bow and line the streets of Lower Manhatttan.

In Lower Manhattan, a new group of skyscrapers and a new group of photographers appear every 20 years. New York rises not from ashes, but from rubble.

Photographers and filmmakers prowl the crushed pink brick flats of the old Washington Market, bare now except for a few circa 1820 Federal dollhouses and one listing cast-iron front, courtesy of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Pulverized handmade brick has a wonderful color.

Behind their backs rise New York's entries in the biggest-buildings-in-the-world sweepstakes — the 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center — and fabled New York skyline.

Photographers have roamed the block-square hills of architectural debris south of Brooklyn Bridge, standing astride solid granite lintels knocked out of Greek Revival doorways to snap through hollow windows at dead lives.

They circle a ruin-in-process now across from the U.S. Steel building going up on Lower Broadway, a new landmark called One Liberty Plaza. The stage-set masonry stands in jagged planes, revealing the dim colors of naked walls printed, like some art film, with the marks of stairs.

### A Vale of Memories

Beside it, 54 stories of exposed girders of the new tower push steel power to the sky. It is going up where the Singer Building of 1906-8 stood until 1968. When the Singer Building went, the marble was carted out in slabs. Memories of the Beaux Arts and Chock Full o' Nuts.

Each generation is drawn by a collective memory of New York and the miracle of regeneration. A moment of stunning anachronism is caught on film: the death of the past framed by the birth of the future. The filmmakers find themselves in the seductive grip of history. They are photographing ghosts.

I have been keeping company with the ghosts — and the photographers—of Lower Manhattan for a long time. I pay them both Sunday morning visits. Traffic is stilled then, and time turns back in the empty streets.

Everything that economics, expediency and unfeeling blindness can do to exorcise these ghosts has been done. but they will not go. For that, New York is lucky.

This remarkable slice of the city, less than a mile across, is spectacularly rich in the concentration of its history and its urban contrasts. Those shards of the past that have miraculously escaped destruction—the drama of Georgian brick at the foot of sheer glass cliffs—tell about change, aspiration and power, and the city's style.

### Stylish Gallery

What comes across clearly in that thin Sunday morning sun and what each generation of photographers seeks is not nostalgia, or sentiment, but style. Style is the quality that gives distinctive character and excellence to art and cities.

Lower Manhattan has more real style in each crowded square foot than any other comparable city in the world. That is a large statement to make, but it stands.

There is not too much concern about style in cities today; the problem is survival. But style is the face of a civilization. It reveals all of its salient facts. There are now 200 years of these facts downtown. (Dutch New York is gone.) Style outlasts human and urban tragedy.

You can read a city through its buildings like a book. The style of Lower Manhattan, as everyone knows, is money. This kind of building is not a social art. It is only secondarily, and magnificently, a cultural expression. It is business.

With the curious, uncaring insolence of art through the ages, which has flourished under all conditions including despotism and inequality, the art of building in the service of business has produced structures of spectacular beauty.

They are beautiful in the mass, and occasionally, as individuals, works of excellence. Their impact is overwhelming. Urbanistically, although Lower Manhattan flirts with nonfunction, the area is great in the sense of the Rome of Sixtus or the Paris of Haussmann.

A walk across the island, moving west from the Chase Manhattan Building, is a sampling of distinction.

Chase Manhattan's 60 stories rise sheer from a plaza next to the impressive, stony Italianate mass of the Federal Reserve Building of 1924. Just past Chase, 140 Broadway is the epitome of nineteen-sixties sophisticated architectural elegance, its severely flat, thin, dark aluminum and tinted-glass façade a study in beautifully detailed restraint. A vermilion cube by Noguchi balances on its perfectly scaled plaza.

Opposite, and splendid foil, is the elaborate French pastry of the 1902 Chamber of Commerce. Continuing west, there is still another contrast, the almost finished U. S. Steel building. Its enormous horizontal spandrel girders, 47 feet between columns, are exposed on the outside of the building. The huge span, and the revealed structure, are high drama.

The three modern towers are the work of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The architects of the Federal Reserve were York & Sawyer; of the Chamber of Commerce, James B. Baker. All of the buildings, old and new, have quality and character. Their sum total is a superior urban experience.

The U. S. Steel building and the World Trade Center, by Minoru Yamasaki & Associates, with Emery Roth & Sons, confront each other across Broadway and Trinity Place. Still more contrast. Next to Steel's structural muscle the much larger Trade Center appears to be built of toothpicks. A 40-inch wall module forms slit windows with aluminum mullions that rise like a soaring radiator grille and descend to Gothic tracery at the ground.

Take your pick of romanticism: the superb, somber brawn of steel as only the 20th century knows it, or the fantasy of glittering verticality reaching for the clouds.

All of Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers are a romantic legend. Just how romantic becomes clear once it is understood that a building decreases in practicality and increases in cost as it rises in height. Above 50 stories the problems go up with the number of floors.

Those romantic towers are primarily exercises in windbracing. Tall buildings sway measurably in the wind. Whatever the ornament or illusion, the design of every tall building is based on an intricate system of exposed or hidden supports to meet that strain.

The dramatic wall girders of the U. S. Steel building supply tremendous stiffening power. The Trade Center's miniscule module is simply a way of making a superstrong, almost solid exterior wall. The engineers, not the legendmakers, are calling the shots.

Less romantically, every one of these structures is a pragmatic economic formula. The real point of 140 Broadway's superb flat skin is a maximum window-to-window office space measurement. The research program that came up with U. S. Steel's handsome girder design is not for a symbol, but for speculative rental to a huge securities firm. The design saves steel.

Only the Port of New York Authority can explain the Trade Center. Nobody really needs two 110-story towers, with all of their construction costs and problems. Somebody obviously wants a monument, but in Lower Manhattan there are no monuments without profits—at least, not intentionally. Dreams of glory are in the form of steel and concrete cost-accounting.

That dream has produced two great skyscraper ages. The first began on Lower Broadway at the turn of the century, and as the buildings soared and spread, correct eclecticism was joined by decorous "modernistic."

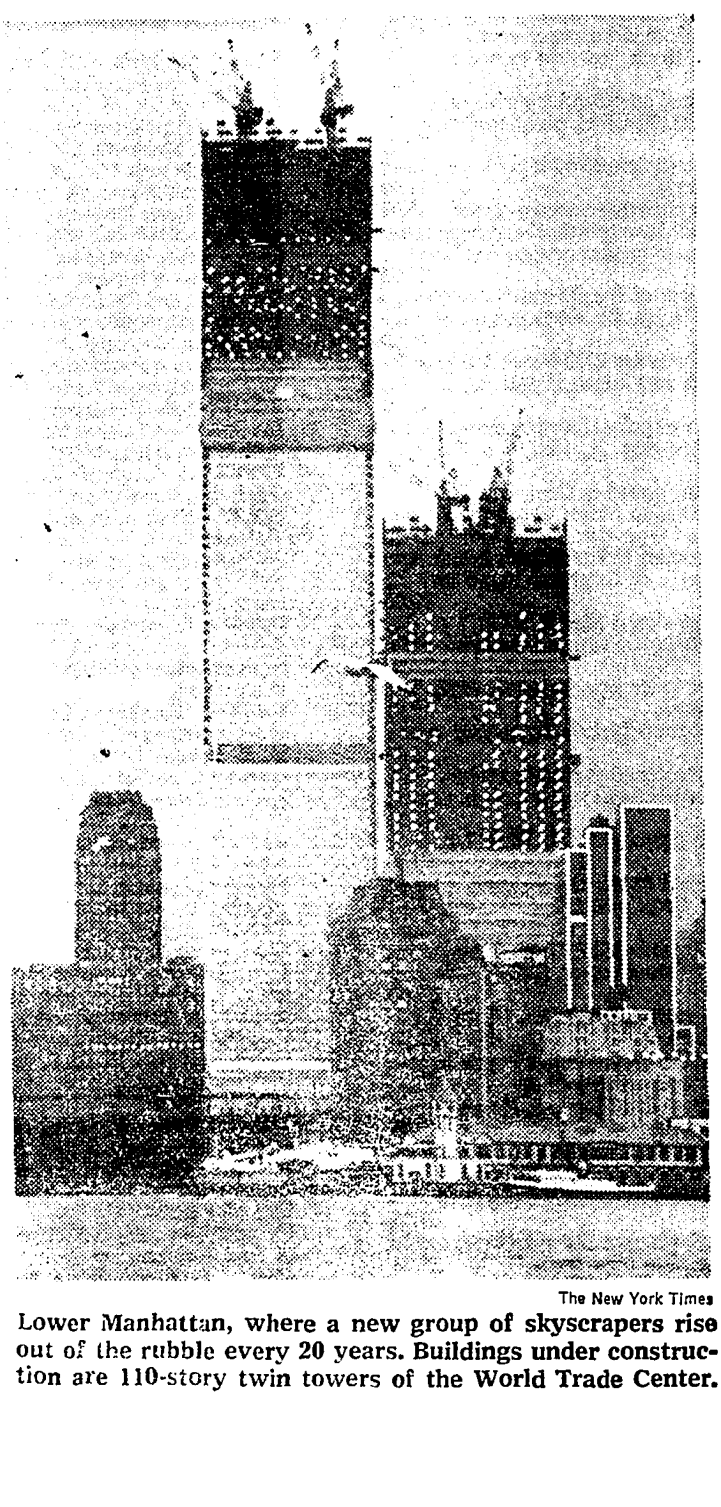
Its monuments — notably the bank buildings on Wall Street and nearby that went up roughly in the 20 years from 1910 to 1930 — are topped by those familiar spires of stone, bronze and gilt that wear Roman tempietos like a hat or indulge in other decorative fantasies as they meet the sky.

After World War II, Chase Manhattan took the lead in 1955. It was an act of faith in in what seemed like a dying downtown. The scale and severity of its new glass and aluminum flattop among those legendary spires created considerable controversy. It also created a downtown renaissance. That renaissance is the second skyscraper age.

On a Sunday morning, the towers are closed and silent. Wall Street sleeps. Downtown belongs again to an old church with a slave balcony and a small house with dormers.

The early 19th-century brick buildings of Fulton Street, the heart of the hard-won historic South Street Seaport, back up against the new glass office buildings that march down Water Street to the Battery. Olive-wreathed attic windows and cast acanthus friezes catch the sun and eye.

Suddenly one sees the smudged, dark line against a wall that marks the place where pitched roofs once stood. There were aromatic spice warehouses, ripped away in the nineteen-fifties for deodorized insurance firms, but their signature remains. The ghosts are there. And so are the photographers.



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**Lower Manhattan, where a new group of skyscrapers rise out of the rubble every 20 years. Buildings under construction are 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center.**