Since September 11, 2001, virtually everyone in this country has been telling stories—about where you were, about what happened, about what is going to happen. My story is simple and was personally chilling: late on September 10, 2001, I completed a proposal for an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society with the title “Destroying New York.” It was to explore all the ways New Yorkers and Americans more generally have imagined the destruction of the city.

Thinking about that exhibition, which I imagined initially would have an almost “fun” and campy tone to it, now brings a wave of humility to this historian. What was once primarily an imagining of fantasies and nightmares became a reality on September 11 and it stunned many historians into temporary silence. That exhibition will have to be transformed, take on a new gravity, and become something of a memorial to the events and the victims.

Talking and writing about the background to and the meaning of September 11 has been humbling not only because of the enormity of the event but also because of the many sinkholes that have opened beneath my feet, as I walked where maybe I shouldn’t have—and into the future. I am reminded of the continuing problem of those of us who are historians: we feel we have a special knowledge of the present (since we think we know where it came from) and yet we also know how rapidly the present changes, and how wrong our predictions usually are. We would do well continually to remind ourselves of what the historian E. H. Carr once wrote about the precariousness of the historian’s vantage point.
The historian, then, is an individual human being. Like other individuals, he is also a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious or unconscious spokesman of the society to which he belongs. It is in this capacity that he approaches the facts of the historical past. We sometimes speak of the course of history as a "moving procession." The metaphor is far enough, provided it does not tempt the historian to think of himself as an eagle surveying the scene from on high or as a V.I.P. in the balcony box. Nothing of the kind! The historian is just another tiny figure treading along in another part of the procession. And as the procession winds along, swelling now to the right and now to the left, and sometimes doubling back on itself, the relative positions of different parts of the procession are constantly changing, so that it may make perfectly good sense to say, for example, that we are nearer today to the Middle Ages than were our great-grandfathers a century ago, or that the age of Caesar is nearer to us than the age of Diocletian. New vistas, new angles of vision, constantly appear as the procession—and the historian with it—moves along. The historian is part of history. The point in the procession at which he finds himself determines his angle of vision over the past.1

Suddenly history seems more important than it has in a long while. Scholars and the general public alike are craving—perhaps only for a short time—for a longer vision on New York's history, on the history of Islam, on the history of our relations with the Middle East. Historians should leap at the chance to provide the insights afforded by decades of research, but we should do so with great caution.

My goal in this essay is threefold. First, I would like to offer a reminder that while what happened on September 11, 2001, was a horrible act of destruction, it follows two centuries of real and imagined destruction of New York City. Second, I want to urge that we understand the three general ways in which New York has been demolished. First are the fantasies, nightmares, and premonitions of New York's destruction that have pervaded New York and American culture for more than a century.

Second is the "regular" destruction and rebuilding endemic to a capitalist city of such intense development. Finally, there are the extraordinary moments of destruction, by natural and unnatural causes, such as the fire of 1835 and the bomb of 1888, as well as the 1920 bombing of Wall Street, and, of course, September 11. By the end of this discussion, I will not without some trepidation—suggest at least a few lessons we might take from these previous bouts of destruction and rebuilding. I will argue that if we seek to honor New York history and gain some redemption from this horrific event, then out of ground zero must come more than simply some striking new skyscrapers or a blazing memorium. We must find a new commitment to the public life that has been at the heart of New York's greatness.

Unimaginable. That is the word people screamed aloud and in their heads, throughout much of September and October of 2001, and perhaps still do. It is the word survivors and witnesses repeated over and over. It was simply unimaginable that the World Trade Center towers were attacked like this, and that they collapsed into oblivion. But in fact people have been imagining this for years, and for decades.

In the summer before September 11, New York and its World Trade Center were repeatedly destroyed. The Japanese animation movie Final Fantasy portrayed a devastated Lower Manhattan beneath a dome, erected to protect the city from the assaults of virus-like aliens. In A.I., a child robot finds himself drawn to a forbidden zone, called "Manhattan," overflowing with water. He makes his way, a child searching for home, past the almost submerged Statue of Liberty, past the lonely World Trade Center towers peeping out above the water, and back to the laboratory where he was "born."

Long before 2001, American culture had returned repeatedly to the theme of New York's destruction almost as a leitmotif—like we couldn't stop. In movies and literature, painting and photography, software and advertising, New York has been destroyed, by fire, by bomb, by flood, by riot, by earthquake, by wrecking ball, and by monsters. The range of ways America's writers and image makers have visualized New York's demise is stunning.

In Joaquin Miller's 1886 novel The Destruction of Gotham, a great fire engulfs the city as lower-class mobs violently attack the homes and stores of the wealthy. Only when Manhattan has "burned and burned and burned to the very bed-rock" is the apocalypse complete.2

On a visit to one of New York's beaches, the housing reformer Jacob Riis worried about the "resistless flood" of immigrants he feared would overwhelm New York. At Coney Island, a few years later, he would have found a different type of fantasy or nightmare of New York's destruction—the hourly tenement fires shown at Coney Island's amusement parks.3
The yearly summer blockbuster action movies come will undoubtedly feature creative new ways of destroying the city, despite the pious claims in the early months after September 11 that our culture would never again make light of New York’s tragedy by making it an object of enjoyment on the silver screen. In the millions, we have watched these movies, and played these games, all to get a charge from watching the skyscrapers of Manhattan topping over.

What, then, do these fantasies tell us, other than that they have been unavoidable to generations of writers and filmmakers and software designers? On one level, the answer is very clear. New York has been the preeminent city of the United States for over a century. Despite its economic travails in the 1970s and the rise of Los Angeles (which has, not surprisingly, seen a growth in its own brand of destruction movies and novels), New York remains the city to beat in all arenas. To destroy New York is to strike symbolically at the heart of the United States.

Beyond New York’s preeminence lies New York’s form and the aesthetics of destruction. We have seen, especially in recent years, a genre of film and television that we might term “disaster porn”—a salacious obsession with graphically portraying death, mayhem, and destruction, whether at the mouths of allegators, by “extreme cops,” or by alien spaceships. With this cultural ferment, no place looks better destroyed than does New York. Godzilla pounding through Phoenix instead of the canyons of Manhattan would not have the same visual impact. Those who watched the disaster on television from afar found the sight of the World Trade Centers falling horrifying and— if they will admit it—also frighteningly beautiful on an aesthetic level. It was a remarkable “site,” in all senses of that word.

We have continued to destroy New York in books, on canvas, and on movie screens and computer monitors for many reasons. But we should not ignore the psychological and the sociological—the more abstract—benefits this society has gained from watching New York being destroyed repeatedly. New York has always embodied the most troubling and longstanding tensions in American history and life: the ambivalence toward cities, the troubled reaction to immigrants and racial diversity, the fear of technology’s impact, and the tensions between natural and human-made disaster. For this history and these reasons, New York remains a place apart, to many an island thankfully on the edge of the continent. To Americans beyond the city’s boundaries, New York City has been and remains a touchstone, the symbol of the best and worst of everything, the barometer of the nation’s health and sickness, poverty and wealth. Americans are married, not always happily but always intensely and profoundly, to New York.

In a nation as religious as the United States—and the United States is the most religious of Western industrialized nations—with a strong apocalyptic strain in its popular culture, it is perhaps not surprising to find so many examples of violent catastrophes. But the focus of so many of these imaginations on New York City is an important aspect of this history that has been little explored. We have missed a central element of New York City history and American popular culture if we ignore the fantasies of this city’s demise.
I would argue, finally, that we destroy New York in our culture because it is so unimaginable for us in reality not to have this city. It is, in a Freudian way, a healthy displacement of our fears onto the screen. As E. B. White wrote, "New York is to the nation what the white church spire is to the village—the visible symbol of aspiration and faith, the white plume saying the way is up!" The white plume we saw on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, was the billowing debris of two massive towers falling down, taking with them thousands of lives. This was shrewdly done by those who knew well the spate of films and programs depicting New York's destruction—they succeeded in making our fantasies and our nightmares horrible reality, turning gleaming symbols of the city into burning signs of terror.

Cultural forms also express, and often reproduce, social experience and relations. This leitmotif of New York's destruction in our culture stems, at least in part, from the real, lived experience of New Yorkers—that their lives and the life of the city have been powerfully and permanently shaped by very real destruction and rebuilding. It is to the "regular" acts of destruction and rebuilding that I now turn.

During his brief return in 1904 from self-imposed exile in Europe, Henry James played an eloquent variation on a powerful theme about New York. The city is "crowned not only with no history, but with no credible possibility of time for history." New York is, always has been, and always will be, wrote James, a "provisional city," defined by a "dreadful chill of change." Thirty years later, in 1935, a long-awaited visitor came from Europe to inspect Manhattan. Like Henry James, who had journeyed back to his hometown, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier came to see how well the most modern of cities measured up. In Manhattan he found a perfect soapbox for pontificating about his vision of the modern city, a "radiant city" of mile-high towers, submerged highways, and wide-open park space. Accompanied by reporters and architects, Le Corbusier toured New York, walking the narrow streets of lower Manhattan and gliding to the top of the Empire State Building. Summarizing the essence of the island, he echoed James, declaring sphericity to be the city's most defining feature. "New York," wrote Le Corbusier, "is nothing more than a provisional city. A city which will be replaced by another city."

Though they used the same words, there was little similarity between these two men. For Henry James the "restless renewals" of Manhattan were a nightmare. The city's mad, money-hungry speculation had brought down his boyhood home and replaced it with a loft factory, and his genteel Fifth Avenue was filled with garish mansions of the nouveau riche. But what Henry James had put forward as an indictment, Le Corbusier now offered as high praise. New York was "a city in the process of becoming." He celebrated the city for being "overwhelming, amazing, exciting, violently alive—a wilderness of stupendous experiment toward the new order that is to replace the current tumult."

Those two almost identical comments, made thirty years apart, remind us that this is perhaps the central tension in New York life: between celebrating and lamenting the city's propensity to destroy and rebuild constantly and its desire to hold onto parts of the past. It is also transposed into the cultural life of the city: the constant transformation of the physical landscape is mimicked in its social and cultural life. Conversely, the city's cultural vitality has been reinforced by the city's physical reinvention.

James and Le Corbusier followed and perpetuated a long tradition of seeing New York's essence. From the time of nineteenth-century New York's great diarist Philip Hone, who first declared New York's favorite maxim to be "overtum, overturn, overturn!" to Luc Sante and his biting critique that in New York the "past has no truck," the city has lived up to its cliché. It is a city where the physical remnants of early generations are repeatedly, and apparently inevitably, visited by the wrecking ball.

The economist Joseph Schumpeter captured the essential process of capitalism—the never-ending cycle of destroying and inventing new products and methods of production—with his phrase "creative destruction." "Capitalism," wrote Schumpeter in 1942, "a is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.... To ignore this central fact is like Hamlet without the Danish prince."
By applying Schumpeter's concept of economic creative destruction to the literal physical destruction and creation of buildings and natural landscapes in Manhattan, I want to suggest how capitalism inscribed its economic and social processes onto the physical landscape of the city, and then into the minds of city people. Marx's pungent phrase "all that is solid melts into air" applies to both the physical landscape of New York and the social and cultural dynamism that came to characterize the city. Schumpeter's phrase, apart from his celebration of capitalist innovation, suggests how the creative destruction of the physical landscape posed for New Yorkers: the fundamental tension between the creative possibilities and the destructive effects of the modern city.

If one looks to New York's past, it is easy to see how one could view "creative destruction" as a natural, inevitable part of New York life, lodged in the very DNA of the city. In the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, the range of ways the city was destroyed and rebuilt in the course of a few decades is stunning. Along Fifth Avenue, the "spirit of Gotham," the mansions of America's wealthiest citizens gave way rapidly to the apartment towers of the 1910s and 1920s. On the Lower East Side, century-old tenements, which could, if asked, remember the visit of Charles Dickens in 1832, were the most notorious of American slums, were demolished by federally financed bulldozers in the 1930s. Jacob Riis started the wrecking ball swinging with his campaign against Mulberry Bend in New York's legendary Five Points area in the 1890s. After a decade of resistance by property owners who cornered these tenements profitable, and the development of new attitudes toward public tenacities, many of the slums of the Lower East Side and elsewhere across the city disappeared. The era of Robert Moses had arrived.

The extraordinary transformation of the city applied not only to private mansions and lowly slums but also to nature within the city. Residents who well remembered how lush and dense Manhattan's natural wealth was in the nineteenth century were appalled by the rapidity with which trees were removed from the city's streets and imprisoned within the city's new parks.

Certainly, the eloquent Henry James, along with his predecessor Philip Hone and his successor Le Carthusian, among many others, was not wrong about this characteristic of the city. Where he was wrong was in his rhetoric of inevitability, and his rhetoric of the naturalness of New York's "creative destruction." Rather than look at New York's history and see a steady, unending series of destruction and rebuilding waves, one should see instead an urban capitalism that produced and continues to produce an urban development process that is both vibrant and often chaotic. The upheavals of New York City were neither the result of dramatic, isolated natural disasters nor the "natural" result of government-sponsored urban renewal projects but, rather, necessary episodes in the process of capitalist urbanization. The city of creative destruction, which so many commentators witness, produced a remarkably uneven landscape of development, with excessive destruction by private capital in one area and too little in another. Along Fifth Avenue, the engine of destruction and rebuilding was revved to a dangerous level to the point that the wealthiest of Americans—who owned homes and businesses along the avenue—fought to slow the engine down. On the Lower East Side, the problem was precisely the opposite; the engine was not working hard or quickly enough, with little private investment to fuel the tearing down and the building of new housing.
in the city that is so often called the “capital of capitalism,” the crucial agents employed to regulate this engine were the municipal and federal governments. In New York history, one usually finds that at the heart of places deemed exemplars of the free market are governmental interventions and investments.

The accounts, for example, for the peculiar paradox of Fifth Avenue—evident as it displayed the “pure” market forces that drove the creative destruction of New York, Fifth Avenue became, in the early years of the twentieth century, the center of intense efforts to resist that market’s destructive dynamic and to preserve a particular, tangible sense of place. Indeed, Fifth Avenue, the ultimate market in private property, was also one of the most regulated pieces of land in the nation. The modern methods of controlling urban land values, uses, and aesthetics all found some of their first trials on Fifth Avenue. It was the site of one of the earliest business districts and business district associations; it was influential in the passing of America’s first comprehensive zoning law (the 1916 Zoning Resolution); and it was subject to informal as well as legal restrictions on architectural form. Simply put, even as it was seen as a symbol of nothing less than America’s wealth generated by “free” capitalist entrepreneurship, Fifth Avenue was the birthplace of modern city planning and some of the most far-reaching efforts at controlling the capitalist market in space.

Finally, history—or the invented past, at least—has been a powerful tool in the development of the city. New York’s landscape, a place swept by change, rarely offered the opportunity to look forward and backward. This did not mean, however, that New Yorkers abandoned the past. But contrary to the popular sense of New York as an ahistorical city, the past—as recalled, invented, and manipulated by powerful New Yorkers—was, in fact, at the heart of defining how the city would henceforth be built. Indeed, all of the diverse city-building efforts New Yorkers took part in and witnessed were shaped by the use and invention of collective memories.

Collective memories were fashioned and used with abandon by the city’s builders, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways: by real-estate developers hoping to enhance the prestige of Fifth Avenue; by historic preservation advocates seeking moral inspiration and assimilationist lessons through the safeguarding of historic landmarks; by tenant reformers eager to engender displaceable memories of slums; and by street-tree advocates who saw in nature a link to a more stable pace of change that would serve as a palliative for the ills of the modern city.

In the ultimate capitalist city, where a square foot of earth in 1900 could command upward of a thousand dollars, and where time itself no longer seemed a dependable substance, collective memories anchored in substances more tangible than words were a rare and powerful commodity. For those who had the capital to impose their economic and political programs on a wider public, collective memories became valuable tools in the development of space.

In most ways, New York has been seen as the city of extremes. But, ironically, the city has not had the single destructive event that other cities can claim: Chicago had its fire, San Francisco its earthquake, Galveston and Johnstown their floods. But New York has never had the defining natural disaster that would divide its history in two.

This fact should not blind historians to the many bouts with catastrophe in the city’s history. The list is long. In 1776, the city was burned and a full third of the urban fabric destroyed during the Battle of New York, which almost saw the end of George Washington and his army. Indeed, when Washington returned in 1789 to be inaugurated as the first president of the new nation, he walked by the charred embers of the British burning that had occurred over a decade earlier. The 1835 fire was even more devastating, with 674 buildings in lower Manhattan destroyed in a blaze begun in a warehouse. In 1863, riots erupted over the Civil War draft, which had claimed the lives of more than one hundred people. On June 15, 1904, in an event all but forgotten by New Yorkers, the General Slocum Disaster, 1,021 people were killed aboard a steamboat that had caught fire in the East River. The milestones continued into the twentieth century, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911, when 146 workers died, the bank panic on Wall Street in 1920, the blaze that struck the Empire State Building in 1945. New York has had its share of disasters.
It would be historically faulty, however, to see the attacks of September 11, 2001, as simply the latest in a string of catastrophes that have affected the city. The character of this disaster differed markedly from earlier, and especially nineteenth-century, disasters. Despite the powerful sense of shared catastrophe—which has left emotional scars on New Yorkers that will last for years—this was not a disaster whose tragedy was shared by all in physical terms.

The attacks happened “down town”—downtown, in the financial district. This was not the case in the disasters of earlier centuries. The city’s early history is littered with events in which the distinctions of wealth and race were swept aside. In a city where rich and poor coexisted, with pigs and prostitutes living alongside Astors and Lenoxes, natural and human disasters were more likely to encompass everyone. The seven-year occupation and eventual burning of the city by the British in the Revolutionary War, already mentioned, was one such moment. The lines of 1826 and then the cholera epidemics of the early nineteenth century swept through much of the city.

In the twentieth century, disasters have not directly affected the whole city. The catastrophes of the past century physically and psychologically deformed individual communities. But the modern city has been defined by something by the localization of disaster, even as dramatic and vast as the World Trade Center attacks. Once the dust was scrubbed from downtown in an astute psychological strategy to contain the crisis, the site largely receded from most New Yorkers’ everyday view, leaving only the vacant sky.

The notion that New York is somehow immune to natural and human catastrophes—and hence to the shock of September 11—is a relatively new idea. To New Yorkers of the nineteenth century, who may have been told stories of the burning of the city during the British occupation, or lost family members to the series of cholera epidemics in the 1830s and perhaps watched the burning of much of lower Manhattan in 1835, or who later saw rioting mobs rage through the city in 1863, the notion that the city was “forever” was simply ludicrous. September 11 did not create a new city, but rather has brought us back to an older New York, where it was understood that the city is extremely fragile.

Thus there are commonalities between disasters past and present in New York. The painter Wassily Kandinsky once spoke of “a great city built in accordance with all the rules of architecture and suddenly shaken by an unpredictable and intangible force.” But we may more soberly ask, how “shaken” have New York and other cities been by their disasters? How fundamentally shaken have the economic and political structures been that shape our physical environment after September 11?

New York has been, like other cities, remarkably resilient in the wake of disasters. Past disasters—“natural” or human-made—have not thrown it off its course. Indeed, for “smaller” events and longer-term shifts have ultimately had much greater impact than catastrophes. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, the rise of the automobile, the revamping of waves of immigrants during the past thirty years, for example, all have had a much greater impact on New York’s economic and physical trajectory than individual moments of calamity.

In fact, city builders throughout American history have recognized that disasters tend to spur economic growth. There are countless examples of disasters that inspired economic booms, and commentators who baldly said so. Indeed, while today it would be highly impolitic to talk about the “benefits” of September 11, for much of America’s history a widely held belief among elites has been that disasters were in fact good for a particular city and the country as a whole. Editors and investors, philosophers and economists welcomed catastrophes such as the San Francisco earthquake and the Chicago fire as valuable opportunities for urban design and economic development.

Yet this seemingly callous response to catastrophes on the part of planners and developers also cannot dispense what is another common experience of cities responding to sudden disaster. New York, like other cities, has been characterized in the wake of September 11 by a powerful psychological bonding and sense of common experience among its citizens. If the rhetoric of the city of creative destruction—the “regular” destruction of New York City life—is more about the inevitability of contestation, open and raw, the rhetoric of disaster is more of personal despair and bitter, sometimes community despair, of group cohesion in the rebuilding effort. Joseph Mart, the Cuban revolutionary who lived in New York at the end of the nineteenth century, spoke admiringly of the city’s resilience in the wake of the crippling blizzard of 1888. New York, “like the victim of an outrage, goes about freeing itself of its shroud.” The democracy of snowfall, covering Fifth Avenue as heavily as it did Mulberry Bend on the Lower East Side, had brought out a “sense of great humility and a sudden rush of kindness, as though the dead hand had touched the shoulders of all men.”

During the month or two following September 11—and to a lesser degree ever since—the nation witnessed and participated in a similarly remarkable outpouring of generosity and humanity. New Yorkers revealed a depth of empathy and kindness that not even the most optimistic expected. The heroism of the city government and the unions of firefighters, police, construction workers, Ironworkers, transit workers, and boilermakers (the list could go on and on) who died trying to save others, and who worked tirelessly to locate the remains of the dead, stunned a city that seemed to have forgotten the working people who built it.

On September 11, blue-collar New York headed up the burning towers to save white-collar New York. Both came down together, in a deadly collapse. No doubt at the very moment of the collapse, somewhere in the World Trade Center a New York firefighter was carrying an injured bond trader. The efforts of those workers, and the sympathy for the dead and living victims, elicited a vast outpouring of love—it was nothing less—offered in innumerable ways by New Yorkers of every type.

Without undermining the true weariness of generosity, it is worth noting a parallel experience in the wake of other catastrophes. There it is often among witnesses to disaster almost a glee in having been a part of such epoch-making events. There is a sense of having lived in history, of having experienced an “authentic,” potentially life-transforming experience. The philosopher William James spoke of the “pure delight” he felt at having witnessed the 1906 earthquake, and admired the universal “cheerfulness” of the San Franciscans he spoke with.
Disasters also open the door to new development possibilities. American planners long ago recognized both the weakness of planning powers in the United States and the opportunities offered to their European counterparts by the Continent’s many wars. They salivated over the examples of the radical remaking of European cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lewis Mumford commented in 1942, for example, that “there is a sense in which the destruction that is taking place through the war has not yet gone far enough” to allow for complete reconstruction along healthier lines after the war."

In the aftermath of September 11, new models, new approaches to social services and to rebuilding, have been posed and debated—the sort of visionary ideas only rarely seen. The city has been the beneficiary of a remarkable outpouring of public monies and services for the victims of September 11, from the social services offered at Chelsea Piers for months after the disaster, to the paying of rents for victims’ families and those living downtown, to grants and loans for businesses in the area. All those were offered with relatively little suspicion or skepticism about whether the recipients were “deserving.” (It is ironic that just as New York has freely dispensed millions to residents and businesses, the city is in the midst of reauthorizing the 1996 welfare reform law and making many of its work requirements more stringent and its penalties more draconian.)

New Yorkers and others have given without demanding “proof” of need, without the kind of distrust of citizens—especially of the poor—that Americans have come to attach to public benefits. In this way, September 11 has brought a rare weakening, perhaps momentary, in the attack on public functions and services that has swept the country over the past two decades.

The flip side of this opening of new possibilities is that disasters and the process of rebuilding rarely, if ever, radically transform economic divisions and power structures, as already suggested. Indeed, previous structures of inequality—economic and political—reassert themselves in the rebuilding process. This too has happened since September 11, virtually all public policies have remained in place, with indications that elites in New York will become even more powerful than they were before the disaster. The Victims’ Compensation Fund is but one example of inequitable approaches to dividing public investments in the wake of September 11. What might have been a first step toward national, no-fault insurance, or at least a fair and equitable disaster-relief policy, turned into yet another iteration of market tyranny. In choosing a method of disbursing money, Ken Feinberg, the “Special Master,” chose a market model: basing compensation on the victims’ earnings and potential earnings “in the market” had they lived. Recognizing that September 11 was a political attack that victimized citizens, he might have based compensation on a political model. The victims were not only wage earners, but also members of the community. Compensation might be provided equally because those three thousand people were unwitting soldiers in the struggle against terrorism equally. Unlike the market system, a democratic political system declares that all citizens have the same rights. Relying on a democratic model—the ideal represented by the flags flying everywhere—one could easily have imagined a solution as radical as democracy itself: all lives are precious; all victims deserve the same compensation."

SATellite VIEW of THE WORLd TRADE CENTER SITE AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001
One might also take a hard look at the renewal of public and governmental action, which seemed to have a resurgence in the wake of September 11. Now it seems more doubtful, despite a few gleaming examples. It should not be surprising that it appears that the greatest citizen input will be around the design of the memorial, the larger development decisions will be narrowly decided by a limited group of city and state power brokers. Indeed, previous power structures—the ones of the 1990s—will in many cases be reinforced. These structures may be strengthened through the economic investment of the federal government in rebuilding the World Trade Center site and through a master plan that emphasizes private development in accord with well-established models. The fundamental of the redevelopment approach already in place by the six-month anniversary of September 11 were virtually indistinguishable from plans of the 1980s and 1990s: an emphasis on sleek and undistinguished office towers, complemented by high-end apartments and condominiums, with a generous helping of other uses to encourage a lively, walking neighborhood.

These designs are the architectural forms of the pragmatism called for by city and state leaders in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Rebuild quickly, officials have urged. Rebuild along development lines we know well! What lies behind this “pragmatic” approach is a belief that the 1990s truly represented one of the greatest eras of economic growth in American history. This is certainly true if one looks only at the total wealth generated and not at how it was distributed. For a large proportion of New Yorkers, however, the 1990s was an economic wash and not the great age of prosperity they have been told it was.

The 1990s did not see wealth “trickle down,” nor did it bring the tilling of the fertile ground of prosperity, rooted in real opportunities, for working-class citizens. Rather, New York became something more akin to a profit-extracting city, strip-mined by financial and investment firms. This is hardly a model for rebuilding New York on more equitable terms.

Indeed, we have already witnessed the cessation of the larger initial discussions about ground zero despite multiple public hearings and neighborhood meetings sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Development Commission and other groups. Already we have to make an effort to remember these early discussions and writings about broadening “the site” to include rebuilding New York along new economic lines. Michael Sorkin, writing for the New York Times Magazine, for example, suggested that the city seize the moment to reconfigure itself into multiple centers—at the heart of Brooklyn, in the Bronx hub, and in flushing.4 This idea has largely disappeared from post-September 11 public discourse.

Wolody Ryttyczynski, on the editorial page of the New York Times, nearly encapsulated the stunted thinking that prevailed by spring of 2002 in many minds: the whole rebuilding of New York comes down, in his opinion, to reconnecting the old street lines of lower Manhattan.4 If this is all the rebuilding of ground zero comes to—some reconnected streets, a public memorial park, and a lot of financial office towers—then truly we will have vacated our dreams. Not long after September 11, on the other hand, the architect Rafael Vinoly called for “filling the void with beauty.”5 Perhaps it is not too late to ask: how are we going to define “beauty” in the urban context? Architecture critic Herbert Muschamp urged New Yorkers to look around the city at works of “progressive” architecture and use them as inspiration for the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site.

Beyond architecture, however, one of the things that makes New York beautiful, and great, is the expansive public sphere that has enriched so many lives and uplifted so many people. New York has represented, in its finest hours, something better than the pursuit of “social capital” or just “capital” the pursuit of social justice with the tools of the community, which is another name for government.6 The World Trade Center was the symbol of capitalism and the free market. But it would be well to remember that it was built with state dollars and unionized workers, was owned by the Port Authority, a governmental agency, and on a daily basis was made possible by the remarkable New York City subway system and all the other services the city provides. When the buildings horribly and devastatingly came down, it was New York’s workers and New York’s municipal government that picked up the pieces.

As we decide what to rebuild at the World Trade Center site, and aim to reaffirm that New York is, as E. B. White wrote, “the greatest human concentration on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions,” perhaps we will refrain from selling off a large piece of lower Manhattan for the proverbial trinkets, and rather make it the foundation stone of a new faith in public life and in our governments.

NOTES
8. White, "Here is New York," p. 123
12. Le Carrousel, p. 45