Willa Cather, Daniel Libeskind, and the Creative Destruction of Manhattan

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> There must be something wonderful coming. When the frenzy is over, when the furnace has cooled, what marvel will be left on Manhattan Island?
>
> —Willa Cather, 1912.

> It seems to me that architecture is, in fact, the machine that produces the universe which produces the gods. It does so not fully through theories or reflections, but in the ever non-repeatable and optimistic act of construction.
>
> — Daniel Libeskind, 2004.

Creative Destruction

In *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan*, Max Page offers a new vision of modern urban development through a history of New York City's architectural destruction. Central to Page's thinking is the idea that the convulsions of capitalist urbanization that shook Manhattan in the early twentieth century were "not defined by simple expansion and growth but rather by a vibrant and often chaotic process of destruction and rebuilding" (2). Exploring the impact of the wrecking ball on New York's shape-shifting cityscape, Page shows how this continual cycle of "creative destruction" encapsulated "the fundamental tension between the creative possibilities and destructive effects of the modern city" (3). The result is a fascinating account of the mutability of urban landscape and the competing social and economic forces that are still shaping cities today.

This article considers the ways in which a similar urban tension between creation and destruction animates two very different yet interrelated New York texts. One is a 1912 short story about skyscrapers by the American modernist writer Willa Cather. The other is an actual skyscraper: Daniel Libeskind's Freedom Tower, which is currently under construction at the Ground Zero site in Lower Manhattan. What links these two city texts is the theme of urban disaster. Cather's story is about the destruction of a high-rise building at the height of the city's first great moment of vertical expansion. Libeskind's design, which comes in the wake of precisely such a disaster, is about the architectural renewal of the skyscraper form in the postterrorist landscape of New York. In such terms, both Cather's story and Libeskind's design are implicated in the process of creative destruction described by Max Page. Cather's narrative concedes the creative possibilities of the modern city but stresses its destructive energy. By contrast, Libeskind's architectural vision responds directly to an act of urban destruction but emphasizes creative possibility. My argument is that, in contrasting ways, these two disaster narratives register long-standing cultural anxieties about modern urban development and the deeply transitory nature of urban landscape. To develop this

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line of thought, I want to focus my discussion on the diverse ways in which Cather and Libeskind interpret vertical New York, paying close attention to the symbolic significance that they both attach to the city's modern skyline.

Cather's Towering Inferno

In May 1912, Willa Cather published "Behind the Singer Tower" in the New York magazine *Collier's*. The story, as John Murphy notes, is "emphatically about New York as futuristic American City," complementing "the theme of destructive ambition in her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (which also came out in 1912), and anticipating Carl Linstrum's complaint in *O Pioneers!* (1913) about the city's tendency to overwhelm its citizens" (24). To this I would add that "Behind the Singer Tower" is also about the legibility of urban space, what Michel de Certeau, adapting Lefebvre, calls the "texturology" of the city (92)—for one of Cather's main points in the story is that a close reading of the skyline can offer insight into the form of modern urbanism that she refers to as "the New York idea" (44).

In a morbid prefiguring of the skyscraper explosions of September 11, "Behind the Singer Tower" is set in the smoldering aftermath of a high-rise hotel fire that traps and kills hundreds of people on the upper floors of the building. Though based on the real-life disasters of the Windsor Hotel fire of 1899 and the Triangle Waist Company fire of 1911, Cather's story also has parallels with one of the twentieth century's most haunting maritime disasters: the sinking of the *Titanic*, an event that occurred less than a year after Cather originally wrote the piece in 1911, and only a month before its first publication in May 1912. Robert Miller explains the connection in his transatlantic reading of the story:

> When "Behind the Singer Tower" was first published on May 18, 1912, American readers had good reason to receive with interest a story about a major disaster in which hundreds of prominent people lost their lives at a time when they felt safely protected by modern engineering and opulent furnishings. The *Titanic* had sunk the previous month, and journalists were still reporting the news of what had gone wrong on that April night in the North Atlantic … In choosing to write about the vulnerability of an exceptionally large object devoted to housing people in transit and in which lives are suddenly and sensationally consumed, Cather seems to have been remarkably prescient. Although Leonardo DiCaprio is unlikely to star in a multimillion dollar production of "Behind the Singer Tower," Cather's "night to remember" can, like the sinking of the *Titanic*, help us to better understand the cultural anxieties running beneath the surface of the century we have so recently left behind. (75)

While Miller is probably right about the actor Leonardo DiCaprio, he is not entirely accurate in saying that "Behind the Singer Tower" is unlikely to become a Hollywood blockbuster, for in many ways it already did with the 1974 sensation *The Towering Inferno*, starring Steve McQueen and Paul Newman. Like Cather's story, the film features a massive skyscraper fire caused by faulty cabling and cost-cutting construction. More to the point, however, the resonance between Cather's towering inferno and the sinking of the *Titanic* hinges on the way that both disasters involve a misplaced confidence in modern technology and engineering, resulting in the destruction of two prominent icons of modernity: the skyscraper and the ocean liner. As Miller's comments suggest, the poignancy of "Behind the Singer Tower" lies in the way that Cather brings the cultural anxieties surrounding the *Titanic* much closer to home. Her disaster occurs not in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, but in the dead center of the modern city—in the shadow, as the story's title specifies, of one of the tallest buildings in the world at that time. As it happens, the Singer Tower (Figure 1) itself has since succumbed to Manhattan's relentless process of creative destruction. In 1968, the early New York skyscraper was demolished to make way for the US Steel Building, an imposing black monolith known today as One Liberty Plaza.

Figure 1. Singer Tower, 1908 (Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Design School).

The plot of "Behind the Singer Tower" centers on a group of male professionals who take a nocturnal boat ride around New York Bay to observe the effect of the skyscraper fire on the urban landscape. Significantly, Cather uses the occasion of the boat ride to offer a gendered critique of postdisaster spectatorship. In particular, she repeatedly calls attention to the way that the men fixate on the size of the skyscrapers: "Zablowski pointed with his cigar toward the blurred Babylonian heights crowding each other on the narrow tip of the island . . . among them rose the colossal figure of the Singer Tower" (46). As the phallic imagery of this passage begins to insinuate, Cather's urban observers exhibit a kind of "edifice complex" in which their concerns about skyscraper safety can be linked in a classic Freudian turn to a more unconscious and distinctly male fear of castration.

This idea certainly appears to inform the passage below, in which Cather's description of the skyline not only emphasizes the phallic dimensions of the vertical city, but also culminates in an excruciating image of dismemberment:

> There was a brooding mournfulness over the harbor, as if the ghost of helplessness and terror were abroad in the darkness . . . The city itself, as we looked back at it, seemed enveloped in a tragic self-consciousness. Those incredible towers of stone and steel seemed, in the mist, to be grouped confusedly together, as if they were left after a forest is cut away. One might fancy that the city was protesting, was asserting its helplessness, its irresponsibility for its physical conformation, for the direction it had taken. It was an irregular parallelogram pressed between two hemispheres, and, like any other solid squeezed in a vise, it shot upward. (44)

Here, the traumatized skyline comes uncannily alive in the imagination of the observer, creating powerful feelings of awe, hysteria, and confusion, and generating uneasy visions of movement, violence, and eruption. In this respect, Cather's urban panorama shares the imagery of pain and discomfort that similarly distinguishes Henry James's infamous portrait of the New York skyline in *The American Scene* (1907).

Returning home to the United States in 1904 after some twenty years spent living in Europe, James finds that the low-rise New York of his childhood has been replaced with a "strange vertiginous" city (61). As he seeks to come to terms with this radical transformation, James offers this piercing critique of the vertical city:

> [T]he multitudinous sky-scrapers standing up to the view, from the water, like extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted, and stuck in as in the dark, anywhere and anyhow, have at least the felicity of carrying out the fairness of tone, of taking the sun and the shade in the manner of towers of marble . . . You see the pin-cushion profile, so to speak, on passing between Jersey City and Twenty-third Street, but you get it broadside

> on, this loose nosegay of architectural flowers, if you skirt the Battery, well out, and embrace the whole plantation . . . Such growths, you feel, have confessedly arisen but to be "picked," in time, with a shears. (60)

Seen here from the same harbor perspective as Cather's story, Manhattan figures first as an overstuffed pin cushion, and then as a disorderly bouquet of overgrown flowers waiting to be sliced apart by shears. In addition to the theme of excess, what links the two metaphors is the imagery of discomfort and incision: needle-points, sharp edges, and even the threat of decapitation. Moreover, this skyline also suffers from an absence of order. In James's terms, the constellation of skyscrapers conforms to no visible pattern, suggesting a perceived need for some degree of rationality and restraint to be imposed upon the city's upward growth.

For Henry James, then, the effect of gazing at the skyline after returning home from his extended stay in Europe is to experience both wonder and unease: wonder at the vertical excess and extravagance, and unease at the unfamiliarity of this new and animated urban spectacle. The result is a dual sense of excitement and estrangement. Part of the reason is that James's response to the modern metropolis is colored by a Eurocentric nostalgia for prevertical New York. What James therefore reads into the text of the defamiliarized skyline is, quite literally, the *unhomeliness* of the vertical city—a manifestation, in Anthony Vidler's terms, of "the architectural uncanny" (7).

Cather's vision of the modern city is similarly distinguished by a manifestation of the architectural uncanny, and even echoes James's urgent call for urban order. In "Behind the Singer Tower," James's overstuffed pin cushion becomes the emasculated city squeezed in a vise. In Cather's version of the unhomely metropolis, however, the threat of dismemberment looming over James's skyscrapers is gruesomely realized with the destruction of the story's high-rise hotel. The subtle effect is to question the male-inflected aura of power, competition, and achievement hanging over the modern skyline, and in the process, to expose the vulnerability of New York's vertical project—what Cather describes almost in terms of an erection as a "whole scheme of life and progress and profit" that depends on being "perpendicular" (46).

Looking beyond Cather's commentary on modernity and masculinity, however, it is worth calling attention to the way her somber vision of the early-twentieth-century skyline resonates eerily with the appearance of downtown New York on September 11, 2001—a day when the city, enveloped in the smoke, dust, and debris of the collapsed WTC towers, experienced the real trauma of a real skyscraper catastrophe. This resonance is further amplified by Cather's attention to the human dimension of her urban disaster. In the following passage, Cather is writing about the fictional "Mont Blanc Hotel"—an Alpine reference designed to conjure up images of high altitude—yet her words could almost as easily be describing what happened at the Twin Towers:

> On the night of the fire the hotel was full of people from everywhere, and by morning half a dozen trusts had lost their presidents, two states had lost their governors, and one of the great European powers had lost its ambassador. So many businesses had been disorganized that Wall Street had shut down for the day. They had been snuffed out, these important men, as lightly as the casual guests who had come to town to spend money, or as the pampered opera singers who had returned from an overland tour and were waiting to sail on Saturday. The lists were still vague, for whether the victims had jumped or not, identification was difficult, and, in either case, they had met with obliteration, absolute effacement, as when a drop of water falls into the sea. (44)

Among the many haunting images that emerged from New York on 9/11, one controversial photograph stood out for the way it so intimately revealed the horror of that day. Taken from street-level by photojournalist Richard Drew only moments before the first skyscraper collapse, the still shot captured the image of an unknown man free-falling head first past the

straight vertical lines of the Twin Towers. In a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Drew movingly describes the image as "a photographic record of someone living the last moments of his life" (13), adding that "every time I look at it, I see him alive" (13). As Drew's comments suggest, part of what makes the photograph so disturbing to view is the way it raises some very difficult questions about the nature of suicide, death, and human agency. These are the same questions raised by Cather's story and its own horrific images of high-rise leaping, including one of an opera singer fatally plunging from his hotel window "toward the cobwebby life nets stretched five hundred feet below" (45). Such uncanny parallels between Cather's 1912 story and Drew's 2001 photograph are more than just a simple case of fiction foreshadowing reality. They reveal deep-rooted cultural anxieties about the fallibility of skyscrapers and the dangers of placing too much trust in technological progress.

In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, a thought-provoking collection of essays on the events of 9/11, cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek notes the similarities between the real images of mass destruction in New York and the fantasy disaster spectacles of Hollywood blockbusters like *Escape from New York* (1981), *Independence Day* (1996), and *The Matrix* (1999). Zizek goes on from this often-made observation to argue that

> the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the biggest surprise . . . We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite the reverse . . . It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality. (16)

Zizek makes a compelling point about the way in which the events of 9/11 inverted our experience of the conventional relationship between the reality of urban disaster and its popular cultural representation. Yet the history of that representation reaches back much further than the action films cited by Zizek. In "Behind the Singer Tower," Cather's preoccupation with towering infernos, high-rise leaping, and post-disaster spectatorship shows that the fantasy rehearsal of New York's architectural destruction has been ongoing ever since the city's first moments of verticality. In short, Cather's story illustrates how the image that crashed into and shattered our reality on 9/11 has been in circulation for as long as the form of the skyscraper itself.

Libeskind and the New York Idea

In Cather's vision of the New York skyline, the soaring verticals of the city function primarily as icons of capital, and this symbolism is one source of her anxiety about the skyrocketing development of Manhattan. For Cather, the vertical city is above all a material expression of the capitalist axiom that "men are cheaper than machines" (51). This idea is reinforced in her subplot of the immigrant construction workers who are used by the city's skyscraper developers as "waste to clean their engines" (49). Here, Cather emphasizes the role played by immigrant workers in building the skyline. She also underlines the point that the capitalist ideal manifested in the skyline is founded on the reification and exploitation of New York's immigrant population.

Reflecting on the death of an Italian immigrant killed while working on the foundations of a skyscraper, the character of Hallet, a steel-construction engineer, offers these philosophical musings on urban development:

> There's a lot of waste about building a city. Usually the destruction all goes on in the cellar; it's only when it hits high . . . that it sets us thinking. Wherever there is the greatest output of energy, wherever the blind human race is exerting itself most furiously, there's bound to be tumult and disaster. Here we are . . . throwing everything we have into that conflagration on Manhattan Island, helping, with every nerve in us, with everything our brain cells can generate, with our very creature heat, to swell its glare, its noise, its luxury and its power. Why do we do it? (55)

This passage raises several key issues. First, and perhaps most disturbingly, it comments on the way that the modern city can reduce human life to the category of urban waste. Second, it identifies the inevitability of disaster in an urban space pushed in every dimension to extremes. Finally, and most importantly, the passage asks why humanity pours its soul into building up the city.

Cather's answer to that question is the inescapable magnetism of "the New York idea," also described in the closing sentences of the story as a "new idea of some sort" and an "unborn Idea" (54). Exactly what constitutes this newly evolving idea remains largely unanswered in Cather's story—beyond the general point that it is somehow embodied by the city's vertical architecture and involves both a competitive male drive and, as Robert Miller suggests, a "blind belief in progress" (80). Marilyn Arnold puts it more emphatically when she argues that Cather's New York idea "reminds us that the cost of a thing can be measured by the amount of human life expended in acquiring it; and by this standard the cost of the New York dream is staggering" (92). As Arnold's comments suggest, the New York idea can be understood as both urban dream and urban nightmare. For Cather, however, it is ultimately a source of suffering and a form of mental enslavement: "it's the whip that cracks over us till we drop" (54).

As a counterbalance to Cather's pessimism, I want to conclude this article by considering an alternative articulation of the New York idea in which the modern skyline functions not as an oppressive icon of capital, but instead as a powerful symbol of social opportunity. This other, more optimistic articulation of the New York idea comes from the contemporary architect Daniel Libeskind, who immigrated to New York from Poland in the late 1950s. Crucially, this experience of immigration is integral to his architectural vision for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site and its monumental centerpiece, the Freedom Tower (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Design study for Freedom Tower and WTC site, 2004 (Courtesy of Studio Daniel Libeskind and Archimation).

In "Memory Foundations," his architect's statement for the WTC project, Libeskind specifically cites the memory of sailing into New York Harbor and seeing the city's skyline for the first time as a source of inspiration for his skyscraper design:

> I arrived by ship to New York as a teenager, an immigrant, and like many millions of others before me, my first sight was the Statue of Liberty and the amazing skyline of Manhattan. I have never forgotten that sight or what it stands for. This is what this project is all about . . . Now everyone can see not only Ground Zero but the resurgence of life . . . The sky will be home again to a towering spire of 1776 feet high, the "Gardens of the World." Why gardens? Because gardens are a constant affirmation of life. A skyscraper rises above its predecessors, reasserting the pre-eminence of freedom and beauty, restoring the spiritual peak to the city, creating an icon that speaks of our vitality in the face of danger and our optimism in the aftermath of tragedy. Life victorious.

In contrast to Cather, who sees high-rise New York in terms of congestion and deformity, Libeskind presents the skyline as a space of liberation and renewal. And even though it marks a response to one of the most significant skyscraper disasters in urban history, his vertical vision contains none of the imagery of violence and eruption that comes to dominate Cather's textual cityscape. Rather, in Libeskind's vision, the form of the skyscraper emerges from the postterrorist landscape as a natural, regenerative presence in the city, an idea reinforced in his high-rise design by the incorporation of hanging vertical gardens in the translucent glass spire of the tower. The implication is that, in contemporary global cities like New York, the skyscraper has now become such a domesticated and mentally internalized form that, as in the case of the Twin Towers, its absence can be far more uncanny than its presence.

A key point that Libeskind makes in his rhetoric of renewal is that what his skyscraper symbolizes is nothing less than the democratic ideal of freedom that he originally read into the skyline as an immigrant arriving in New York. Not only does Libeskind refer to the Freedom Tower as an icon of opportunity and optimism, but he also sees its presence in the cityscape as a reassertion of the American spirit of liberty. Indeed, the idea of freedom is so integral to Libeskind's design that it has been inscribed into virtually every dimension of the building. Most obviously, there is the building's name. But there is also the building's height of 1776 feet, a number that explicitly references one of the most important dates in American history: the year of the Declaration of Independence. Finally, and perhaps most subtly, there is the building's form. The asymmetrical tower and soaring offset spire are deliberately designed to evoke the gently twisting profile of the Statue of Liberty, thereby setting the skyscraper into dialogue with the city and its immigrant history.

Coming as they do from the deeply philosophical and politically attuned architect of such difficult memorial projects as the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Imperial War Museum in northern England, Libeskind's sweeping symbolic claims for the Freedom Tower may seem a little oversimplified. In particular, his architect's statement completely elides the sinuous and contentious history of "freedom" as a concept in multicultural America, including immigrant New York. It also remains to be seen whether the Freedom Tower can be sustained as the city's "spiritual peak" over the long term. These equivocations aside, however, it is at least fair to say that Libeskind's design does succeed in "recapturing the skyline"—to cite a loaded phrase often used by the New York press and, in a more proprietorial capacity, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

Jean Baudrillard recently argued in *The Spirit of Terrorism* that, in their uncanny doubleness, the Twin Towers put a halt to New York's "competitive verticality" (42). With the Freedom Tower design, Libeskind has restarted the city's race for the sky on the very site where it was temporarily suspended. Libeskind even acknowledges the building's competitive vertical function in his architect's statement when he stresses that the tower rises triumphantly above its predecessors, including the Twin Towers that it replaces. In this respect, what Libeskind's design registers is the tenuous yet deeply embedded ideological connection in the American public mind between democracy and the vertical form of the skyscraper, a connection that the urban planner Thomas Adams already identified back in 1931 when he wrote that, for many people, "New York is America, and its skyscraper a symbol of the spirit of America" (576).

The Unfinished City

In *The Unfinished City*, Thomas Bender suggests that New York's "very essence is to be continually in the making, never to be completely resolved" (xi). Though Cather and Libeskind have sharply contrasting views about vertical New York, both understand and acknowledge that, like the character of the city itself, the urban landscape is shaped by a process of continual invention and change that can never be complete. Even the soar-

ing construction of the Freedom Tower on Ground Zero evokes the incompleteness of New York, since the very existence of this monument to urban renewal recalls the radical impermanence of the city.

For Cather, whose critique of the cityscape coincides with New York's early experiments with verticality, the creative destruction of Manhattan becomes a source of anxiety about the volatile future of capitalist urbanization. The result is a vision of the rising skyscraper city dominated by images of disorder and destruction that uncannily prefigure the high-rise horrors of 9/11. For Libeskind, whose perspective on New York comes in the immediate aftermath of those horrors, the unfinished city becomes a space of creative possibility and social opportunity. As New York awaits completion of the Freedom Tower and the rest of the redevelopment of the WTC site, it remains to be seen whether this latest reshaping of the urban landscape will be perceived in the public imagination as predominantly belonging to the urban nightmare projected by Cather, or to the urban dream envisioned by Libeskind.

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