

The Journal Interview with Robert Stern / By Eric Gibson

New York, New York

NEW YORK—Manhattan gridlock got you down? It helps to take the long view. "There were traffic jams in the 1880s. You couldn't get from midtown or the fashionable area of Murray Hill to Wall Street in less than an hour," says architect and historian Robert A.M. Stern. "The richest people, the Rockefellers and Morgan, took the Elevated [train] down to Wall Street because there was no other way to do it."

Founder and senior partner of his own firm and dean of the Yale School of Architecture, Mr. Stern knows something about the long view. Since 1983, he has been writing a history of New York City's architecture and urban fabric. Four volumes have already appeared: "New York 1880" (covering 1865-1890), "New York 1900" (1890-1915), "New York 1930" (the interwar years) and "New York 1960" (World War II to the bicentennial). They range in length from 500 to 1,400 pages but the latest, "New York 2000" (Monacelli Press, \$100) outdoes them all. Covering 1976 to 2000 and written, like the others, with the assistance of co-authors, it runs to 1,520 pages—and nearly 11 lbs. It landed in bookstores, daintily as a wrecking ball, earlier this month.

Interviewed in a sleek, minimalist aerie that serves as his "writing room" two floors above his architectural offices in the West 30s, Mr. Stern says that the terror attacks of 2001 and their aftermath might have made a more logical stopping point. But he opted for the millennium when he realized that the story of rebuilding Ground Zero was "a psychodrama that's going to go on forever."

Will there be a "New York 2030"? Maybe, although by then "I'll be 93 or something like that," he observes.

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Building by building, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood, borough by borough, Mr. Stern's five books trace New York's rise from prosperous but provincial city—limited to Manhattan island and largely bounded by 42nd Street and the waterfront—to the sprawling, five-borough world capital it is today. They paint a picture of a city in flux, an urban palimpsest undergoing a perpetual, 140-year makeover that shows no signs of stopping. The comment made by one observer in 1866 could almost be the city's motto: "A new town has been built on top of the old one, and another excavated under it."

One surprise is that the qualities we variously celebrate and rail against today aren't of recent vintage, but were in evidence within the first decades after the Civil War: the city's infectious energy; its magnet status to those in search of opportunity, be they immigrants or transplants from other parts of the country ("Why did John D. Rockefeller move from Cleveland?" asks Mr. Stern, rhetorically. "He knew he had to be in New York."); its role as a financial center; the congestion, the overbuilding and the middle-class flight; the insistent pressure to expand outward; and the primal need to conquer distance and height through unheard-of feats of en-

gineering. "The story stays the same, but the characters are always new," notes the author.

A recurring theme throughout the series is New York as America's "representative city." Mr. Stern briskly ticks off his arguments. "It is the financial capital of the country. It is the cultural capital. And now it's the media capital. It is also the part of the country that has the richest representation of the diversity of the country," he says. "And it has these amazing institutions which, though they are New York institutions, are really national," like the Metropolitan Museum and the New York Public Library.

Lastly, he says, New York has things that no other city in the U.S. has, at least not in the same way. "Frederick Law Olmstead built in many places," says Mr. Stern. "But Central Park is incomparable." Case closed.

He cites three major turning points that helped propel New York into the city it has become. One is infrastructure. "The Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, the Elevated railroad at virtually the same time, made it possible to move around." Then there were "the extraordinary contributions of immigrant groups." Also technology. "The steel frame [in 1889] and the elevator in [1870] combined to make it possible to build at extraordinary densities."

And how. Those two innovations unleashed a race for height that by the first quarter of the 20th century had turned New York into Skyscraper City. The drive reached fever pitch in the 1920s, when one designer proposed a tower for 42nd Street between 8th and 9th Aves. that would have been 1,208 feet tall—a mere 142 feet less than the World Trade Center would attain 50 years later.

Of course, there have been turning points of a different kind. Though New York's near-death experience in the mid-1970s, when it narrowly averted bankruptcy, was the most severe crisis the city had faced before Sept. 11, it was by no means the first. The series charts a regular cycle of booms and busts, each of which left its mark.

But New York seems to possess a preternatural ability to spring back. Adaptability is the key. For example, "one of the great things about New York is that the buildings are very flexible," notes Mr. Stern, in particular the early skyscrapers in Lower Manhattan, originally built as offices. In the days before air conditioning, every office worker needed reasonable access to light and air, and a distance of about 27 feet from the exterior wall inward toward the core was the ideal module around which to design, he says. That way nobody, be it CEO or secretary, would be too far from a window to work comfortably.

Another factor in New York's survival has been the ability to learn from its mistakes. This, in a nutshell, is the story of "New York 2000." Where the first four books charted an almost devil-may-care arc of expansion and development, the spirit of this one is sober retrenchment, of repairing past errors and avoiding their repetition. "The city was involved with a sense that we had lost something in the postwar era with the kind of urbanism that was practiced—the wholesale clearance of neighborhoods to make way for a kind of institutionalized redevelopment of high rise buildings and parks and so on," says Mr. Stern. As a result, "we did go backwards to look at things and to rediscover things that worked."

So there is a good deal about reclamation (cleaning up Times Square), sensible urban planning (Lower Manhattan's Battery Park City), and preservation (sparing Grand Central Terminal the same fate as Pennsylvania Station, and carving out a roughly 57-block or 1044-building protected area on the Upper East Side).

Yet for all the non-stop building that goes on in—and defines—New York, the uncomfortable fact remains that beyond a handful of familiar icons it is, well, hard to point to a lot of truly distinguished buildings. The criticism made by architectural critic John Schuyler in 1898 and quoted in "New York 1900" still applies: "The real defect of modern architecture," he wrote, lies in "the estrangement between architecture and building—between poetry and prose."

With land and construction costs high and continually rising, most architecture is driven by a pragmatic, bottom-line mentality, an attitude whose most apt symbol isn't one particular building but an amenity: the humble balcony, which became a standard fixture in Manhattan apartment buildings beginning in the mid-1950s.

"[It] was pure economics, not tenant preference, that gave the balcony terrace its wide popularity," writes Mr. Stern in "New York 1960." [T]he cost of building a balcony was only about one-quarter the cost of building a fully enclosed room, yet it could be rented at the equivalent of half a room's rent. More important, the balcony counted as half a room when the builder applied for his FHA mortgage, so he could borrow twice as much as the feature cost him."

Mr. Stern concedes there is a school of thought that argues that "we need all these dazzling icons," but asks, by way of response, "what are they doing for the streets of the city, what are they doing for the neighborhoods? That's the way they should be measured, not just that they stand out." Besides, "I think New York has been great in that architects have been very pragmatic but some of them have produced poetry from the pragmatism. The poetry of pragmatism is New York's strength," he asserts. "You know, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, the Waldorf Astoria hotel and Rockefeller Center were buildings that were meant to have 'curb appeal' if you will, but also were meant to meet the bottom line."

From time to time the idea of the city as a social unit has fallen out of favor. It happened in the 1960s, notes Mr. Stern, and was one factor contributing to New York's fiscal crisis a decade later. "Corporations had moved to the suburbs, people were already living in the suburbs and arguments were made by very impressive people, Lewis Mumford and others, that cities were no longer needed," he says.

With videoconferencing and the like making it possible to work anywhere, and cities such as New York, London and Madrid now terrorist targets, could we be entering another one of those phases? Central cities will always be needed, counters Mr. Stern. "The more electronic communication we have the more people need to actually talk to each other. It's lonely in your living room," he notes wryly. And "we've all learned that face-to-face discussion is really important—you can't do it on videoconferencing or whatever. So there is a reason still for every one of these big corporations to have a presence near other big corporations, whether they're rivals or the people they need to function, like their bankers or their suppliers," he observes.

"I think we're here to stay."

Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Leisure & Arts Features editor.

China's Development Dilemmas

By Ian Holliday

China will use a series of upcoming summits with its Asian trading counterparts to promote its vision of a pan-East Asian trading zone. Next month, Beijing's leaders will gather for two summits with their Association of Southeast Asian Nations partners, plus a broader gathering for the East Asia Summit. Ultimately, Beijing's aim is to unite two billion consumers with a combined GDP of around \$8 trillion—more than 20% of total global trade.

It's an ambitious, yet achievable vision. In 2005, the value of China's trade with 10 Southeast Asian nations hit \$130 billion, exceeding Beijing's projections by over 30%. In Central Asia, trade and investment is projected to grow from \$40 billion today to \$100 billion by 2010. In South Asia, China may overtake the U.S. as India's major trading partner within the next few years.

The trend is even more pronounced in China's closest neighbors. Laos has a partially renminbi-ized economy. Burma is largely an extension of China. Northern Thailand is oriented as much toward the mainland's Yunnan and Sichuan provinces as toward Bangkok.

But China's development practices still leave much to be desired. Take employment standards: In jade and ruby mines in central and northern Burma, for instance, working conditions are often abysmal. Chinese investment isn't always sensitive to environmental concerns. Despite undertakings by the Chinese government to impose tighter regulatory controls, illegal logging remains prevalent in Southeast Asia. In Burma's northern Kachin State, and in the eastern Shan State, illegal loggers are rapidly eliminating forests critical to the regional eco-system.

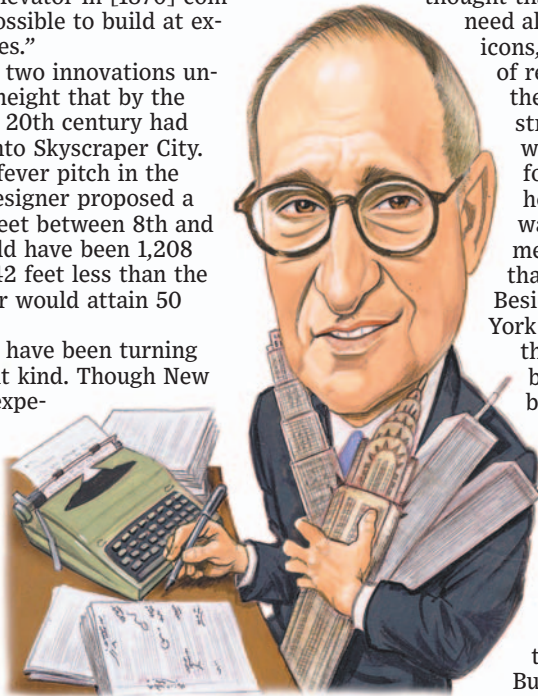
This kind of trade hurts every country involved. The golden triangle of drug trade, drug use, illegal gambling, unregulated prostitution and illicit trade between Yunnan Province, Burma, and Laos—is highly destabilizing. Indeed, in these trans-border regions that fall only minimally under any government's control, China needs to exercise extreme care in how these trading links develop.

Similarly, in the environmental sphere, it is necessary for policy makers to consider longer term objectives in building investment and trading relations. Once environmental degradation takes place, the effects can spread far beyond formal borders. At present, the regional environmental impact of Southeast Asia's excessive logging and unregulated industrialization is unclear. But China should be as concerned about these trends as its neighbors.

To its credit, China has made strides to improve its employment practices, particularly through its labor laws. In the region, progress is clearly being made towards more responsible corporate activity for Chinese companies. At the same time, however, there is little equivalent development in neighboring countries. Here, China has an opportunity to exercise leadership not simply in economic growth, but also in good business practices.

With such a robust economic base at home, and a strong entrepreneurial presence in many parts of Asia, China is ideally placed to drive Asian economic integration. At the same time, it should argue for better regulated trade, tighter environmental standards and improved working practices throughout the region. As Beijing consolidates its leadership position in Asia, it must recognize that its own interests will be gravely compromised unless it pushes for higher standards across the integrated regional economic space it is seeking to create. Watch the upcoming summits closely.

Mr. Holliday is dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong.



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