Our Buildings, Ourselves

The morning after the conflagration only one of the building’s faces remained standing, “tottering over our heads,” one reporter wrote, “and threatening in its fall to overwhelm” the fire fighters toiling below. Such a fate, however horrifying, might have seemed all too fitting to the crowd of onlookers. For the “stupendous edifice” had, symbolically at least, collapsed as soon as it was built, taking the fortunes of many locals down with it. In time, the building—along with the city and its people—recovered some of the pride that had nourished the dream of erecting the nation’s largest and finest architectural monument. But doubts persisted. Tongues clucked. “This lofty and huge building,” one editorialist intoned in the wake of the collapse, “has been a terror to the considerate citizens ever since its first erection.” Its like, he argued, ought not to be seen again.

No, not the World Trade Center, but the Boston Exchange Coffee House (or BECH), a grand tableau in bricks, marble, and mortar that spread out over an acre and soared some eight (eight!) stories high, casting an unaccustomed shadow over the tiny, crooked lanes of early national Boston in the 1810s.

Perhaps because this vignette comes not from twenty-first-century New York but from Federalist New England, it has a far less tragic ending than the human and architectural devastation so wantonly visited on lower Manhattan last September. After working for only a couple of days, “two ingenious and active mechanics” succeeded in dismantling the teetering wall “without the least damage to the neighborhood, or to the thousands of spectators, who were witnesses of this sublime ‘wreck of matter.'” Not a single life had been lost in the blaze, and only one in its aftermath. Even the pile of smoldering rubble—however vast it appeared in the eyes of long-ago Bostonians—would seem positively quaint in comparison to Ground Zero.

Fig. 1: “Conflagration of the Boston Exchange Coffee House” (1824), by John Ritto Penniman. Private collection. Photograph by Richard Cheek.

But however different the scale of the WTC’s times and the BECH’s, the comparison between these two fantastical structures and their violent demises remains instructive. Taken together they remind us that Americans have long forged deep, intimate, and enduring links with their public buildings. A direct ancestor, in this sense, of the WTC, the BECH was less a workplace than a canvas on which people of many stripes projected their sense of themselves, their city, their nation, and its future between 1808 and 1818.

That future, the BECH’s builders believed, was bright. And in the emerging architectural parlance of the United States, bright meant BIG. More than anything else, size was the story of the BECH. A full (and, as it turned out, fateful) two stories taller than the largest fire equipment in the city, the building positively dwarfed its surroundings. Indeed, it must have been hard to see the top of it, for the dome’s apex stood about one hundred feet above a thirty-foot-wide street, a neck straining combination. No wonder writers of the day exhausted their store of adjectives—it was “enormous,” “grand,” a “mammoth affair,” an “immense pile of building”—in their attempts to convey something of the building’s magnitude. The *cost* of the BECH, as was often noted, was outsized too; the building’s construction consumed upwards of half a million dollars—an amount roughly equal to the total value of the 146 school buildings that served Boston, money the BECH’s backers would never come close to recovering.

In terms of sheer scale, the BECH positively screamed “America”: a land of increasingly expansive spaces, peoples, fortunes, and even failures. How fitting, in this sense, that the BECH was financed by a chain of banks reaching into the vast forests of the Old Northwest, all the way to Detroit. Worthless paper, it would turn out. But fitting, in its Great West-ness, nonetheless.

Yet if the BECH’s scale and financial undergirding looked to the nation’s interior, its stylistic sensibility looked toward London, which remained in the 1810s the metropolitan center in American minds. Literally as well as metaphorically, the BECH faced East. Its privileged view of Boston Harbor was one of the building’s prime stocks-in-trade. Just under the crowning dome perched a special “seat and box, containing a perspective glass” through which

enterprising merchants could view the progress of their—and their competitors'—cargoes from across the Atlantic. The building's interiors, too, offered an arriviste's grand tour of the finest in European décor. The odd bricolage of homegrown American and imagined European styles became clear in the grand ballroom, where elaborate draperies made of fine imported satins and moreens hung "suspended from a bow and arrows, highly gilt." Surely this was "one of the most tasteful splendid rooms on the continent." (And perhaps the envy of *another* continent as well?) Touring the elegant Coffee Room for which the BECH was named, one hopeful critic opined that "very few European Coffee Rooms are equal to this."

An American-sized building yearning for European refinement, the BECH was also a sort of temple: a New England cathedral for those who worshipped a commercial future. Much as the World Trade Center would later cast a permanent shadow over Trinity Church, the BECH's vision of a public life centered on commerce and civic assembly would attempt to overshadow other, competing versions of public life. Scale is important here, too. It cannot have escaped notice that many of the finest local houses of worship, along with Boston's Old and New State Houses and Faneuil Hall, could all have nestled comfortably within the BECH's 102,000 square feet. The building's very name—Exchange Coffee House—declared that commerce, information, and internationalism were the ways of the future, the dreams of Americans.

Fig. 2. Minoru Yamasaki, architect; World Trade Center, New York City, 1966-73.

How many of these dreams-in-architecture still animated the United States in the age of the World Trade Center? Surprisingly many, I think. The WTC, like the BECH, combined European sensibilities—the austerity of high modernism, the naked power of function over the beauty of form—with a purely American scale. For the WTC, too, scale was not just a story, but *the* story (a tale of both success and failure, it turned out, as the buildings were almost immediately outclassed by a bigger Midwestern dream). Again like the BECH, the WTC spoke to

a future where America meant commerce—and vice versa. And in all these ways, as one letter to the *New York Times Magazine* recently put it, “the towers of the World Trade Center were as representative of fundamental American values as the Capitol and the White House.” His words would have held nicely for the BECH, as well, for better or worse.

If architecture embodied those values before the catastrophe of 9/11, can architecture help to heal the nation’s wounds now? On its face, the idea seems absurd, trivializing. Writing last November in the *New Republic*, critic Leon Wieseltier deplored the very notion. “There was something grotesque,” he argues, “about the alacrity with which architects leaped into the *Times* with exciting plans for [rebuilding] the scene of the slaughter. It was as if history itself had announced a competition.”

But when the dust, spiritually and physically, has settled, something will rise, Phoenix-like, from Ground Zero. And whatever it is will reflect not just design sensibilities but dreams of America—dreams of the city, the nation, the hopeful and terrifying future.

Or so, at least, it went in Boston. After much debate about the combination of fate and arrogance that contributed to the rise and fall of “this modern Babel,” the BECH was rebuilt, partly at public expense. The second BECH was an unassuming affair, four-and-a-half stories high, covered in clapboard with few ornaments beyond simple wooden shutters. Designed as a meeting space and restaurant, the new BECH served “unexceptionable” wines and other humble fare to a devoted local clientele. No longer a destination for out-of-towners or the object of comment in the national press, the BECH nonetheless eked out a modest success commensurate with its modest goals. It stood till 1853, when bankers with bigger dreams demolished it, this time without fire or fanfare.

In the second BECH Bostonians traded ambition for endurance, the colossal scale of commercial might for the human scale of a neighborhood watering hole. Architects and speculators may have felt betrayed by the choice. But neighbors, I imagine, were delighted. Nearly two centuries later, I wonder: will New Yorkers have the courage to make a similar decision? Can American dreams raise soul over size?

This article originally appeared in issue 2.2 (January, 2002).