

The Height of Ambition: Part Two

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By JAMES GLANZ and ERIC LIPTON

rom its inception, the World Trade Center was sustained by the mysterious but undeniable power of bigness -- extreme, overwhelming, irresistible bigness. Its story begins on Oct. 31, 1955, with a meeting between two supremely powerful New Yorkers. David Rockefeller, the 40-year-old grandson of America's first billionaire and a vice president of Chase Manhattan Bank, invited Robert Moses, New York's public-works czar, for a lunchtime chat in the executive dining room of the bank's headquarters near Wall Street. Rockefeller was working on a big project -- or what he thought was a big project -- the construction of what would become the sixth-tallest office tower in the world, a building that would serve as the new headquarters for Chase Manhattan. But Rockefeller needed a favor. In order to build the new headquarters downtown, he needed Moses to rub out a narrow blocklong street to allow Chase to squeeze the enormous building into Lower Manhattan's tight patchwork of pre-Revolutionary streets.

Not a problem, Moses told Rockefeller; he would do it. But Moses, 66, who had spent his career building an asphalt-and-steel web of highways and bridges across the state, imposed one condition: think bigger. 'You'll be wasting your money unless others follow suit,' Moses told Rockefeller. 'His point,' Rockefeller recalled in a recent conversation, 'was that unless we got others to see that there was a future in Lower Manhattan, they would have moved out before we finished the building.'

Moses had a good reason for his appeal to bigness. Since British invaders built the Great Dock near the foot of Broad Street in 1676, Lower Manhattan had been the land of giants. But the port was now rotting and increasingly obsolete, and the downtown area had been crippled by the financial crash of 1929, the development of giant shipping facilities that Manhattan couldn't accommodate and a flight of businesses to Midtown. The northward shift of the city's financial center had created a new crop of titanic high-rises in the middle of the island. The Chrysler, Graybar and Lincoln buildings all emerged around Grand Central Terminal in the 1920's and 30's, and the Empire State Building, opened in 1931, now towered above the city's first skyscrapers downtown.

Big thinking was not a foreign concept to the Rockefeller family. In New York, they had long acted as a rough equivalent of the Medici family, donating the money to buy the land for the United Nations headquarters, working with Moses to build Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and creating Rockefeller Center, the city's first mega-office complex. Now David Rockefeller had a chance to give birth to something that would dwarf them all.

In January 1960, a downtown group that Rockefeller had formed announced plans for 'a World Trade Center in the heart of the Port District.' The group proposed erecting five million square feet of office space -- some 115 acres of desks, filing cabinets and exhibition floors -- on a 13.5-acre site along the East River in Lower Manhattan. The scale of it fit what Rockefeller would later dub 'catalytic bigness,' something so oversize that it would not only keep Lower Manhattan vibrant (and Rockefeller's property values high) but also inspire other development to

follow -- and thus ensure that New York remained a critical global hub for international trade.

Other players quickly appreciated the boldness of the plan. Austin Tobin, executive director of the Port of New York Authority (today called the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey), made the case in May 1960 that his agency -- until then a desperate witness, if not an actual accomplice, to the shriveling of New York's port -- should be the one to build the project. 'The world today stands on the brink of a new era in international trade,' Tobin said, declaring that New York and the Port Authority should lead the way. As a state-sponsored entity, the Port Authority had a powerful tool at its disposal: the ability to take ownership of land by eminent domain.

Tobin had already decided whom he wanted to oversee the project: Guy Tozzoli, who at the time was planning the 1964 New York World's Fair alongside Moses. Tozzoli, then 40, had construction in his blood -- his father was a small-time home builder in northern New Jersey -- and he shared Moses' love of megaprojects. Once Tobin gave him the job, Tozzoli would take the bigger-is-better principles he learned from Moses and apply them to the creation of the World Trade Center.

It didn't take long before the grand proclamations of Rockefeller, Tobin and Tozzoli collided with prosaic reality. Although nothing big in New York gets built without some resistance, this particular project would spark a series of messy all-out brawls. The first objection came from the State of New Jersey, which with New York finances and gives legislative approval to Port Authority projects. As soon as the Port Authority issued a detailed proposal in March 1961 for a trade center along the East River, New Jersey politicians balked. 'What's in it for us?' they wanted to know.

The Port Authority came up with a quick maneuver to make the project more attractive to New Jersey: moving the proposed trade center to the West Side, to a site occupied by the terminal for a failing commuter railroad that linked Manhattan and New Jersey. The Port Authority offered to take over the railroad -- it would become the PATH -- and New Jersey politicians were mollified. But the move came at a cost. The railroad was already operating under bankruptcy protection; by agreeing to take it over, the authority would almost certainly incur annual losses in the millions.

There was another problem with the West Side: in its new location, the trade center would obliterate Radio Row, a crowded bazaar for cut-rate electronic gadgetry that was one of Manhattan's most vibrant shopping areas. The uproar from Radio Row was like nothing the Port Authority had ever encountered. Merchants paraded down Greenwich Street with a black-draped coffin on their shoulders. 'Here Lies Mr. Small Businessman,' read a placard at the foot of the coffin. 'Don't Let the P.A. Bury Him.'

But the Port Authority had a solution that would take care of both the railroad's looming financial losses and, with some shrewd public-relations work, the ruckus on Radio Row: get bigger still. With the help of Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, David's brother, who backed new legislation, the Port Authority vastly increased the rentable office space, bringing the total to a staggering 10 million square feet -- double what David Rockefeller originally proposed.

To most city planners, a figure like that would have sounded almost farcical. It represented, by itself, more office space than existed in all of Houston, more than in Detroit or downtown Los Angeles. A truly colossal endeavor like this would not only offer the prospect of huge real-estate profits, money that would be needed to offset losses on the commuter

railroad. It would also make the Radio Row merchants look like mere obstructionists standing in the way of the inevitable march of progress. Tozzoli took to calling the goal of 10 million square feet the Program, a term -- and an idea -- that he would relentlessly hammer into the minds of the architects, engineers and bureaucrats who worked on the center. But now that the scale of the project had grown so spectacularly, it drew the ire of a new and more potent enemy: Lawrence A. Wien, an owner of the Empire State Building and a lawyer, entrepreneur, philanthropist and baron of New York real estate. In circles of the polite and the powerful, Wien was not as easily dismissed as the Radio Row protesters. He was a confident, polished orator who seemed to dominate any room he walked into, and he turned his lush, thickly carpeted headquarters on the 48th floor of the Lincoln Building into an elegant spearhead of resistance to the trade center.

In a September 1964 letter to Gov. Richard J. Hughes of New Jersey, Wien called the Port Authority "an unconquerable Frankenstein" creating a vast, government-backed real-estate venture that would cheat the city's private developers. He rounded up virtually every major real-estate power in Midtown and created the Committee for a Reasonable World Trade Center, which took out full-page attack ads in city newspapers. By adding acres of excess office space, Wien said, the trade center would create a catastrophe in the real-estate market on a scale not seen since the Depression. Wien went further, saying that the gigantism of the trade-center project was not just economically unrealistic; it was flat-out dangerous. The center's tremendous size made it "radical and admittedly experimental," Wien's committee charged; the center could endanger thousands in the case of a fire or an explosion. Wien would ultimately suggest, in his most Cassandra-like moment, that an airplane might someday hit the World Trade Center, with disastrous consequences. Wien instantly became Tobin's most despised opponent. The two men faced off at one City Council meeting that lasted from 10 a.m. until long after dark. In Wien's camp was everyone from Jane Jacobs, author of the recently published "Death and Life of Great American Cities," to a young Democratic leader named Edward I. Koch, who called the trade center "a conspiracy by people who think they know what is best for New York City." Tobin, shaking a clenched fist, was forced to deny that the Port Authority was a "supergovernment" unaccountable to the city and state. Wien's voice, along with the protests from Radio Row and a growing number of legal challenges, represented a profound threat to the project. An even more potent voice joined the chorus of critics in 1966: that of Mayor John V. Lindsay, who had just been elected with a promise to stand up for the little guy against the city's back-room "power brokers." Lindsay said that the city was being shortchanged under the financial deal his predecessor, Robert F. Wagner, worked out with the Port Authority on the trade center. For a while, it looked as if the trade center might be "deader than a dead duck," as one Radio Row merchant hopefully put it. The solution came to Guy Tozzoli one morning as he was shaving, and it was, by now, a familiar one: get even bigger. He would expand his canvas still further, he decided, far beyond even the enormous size that had so incensed Wien -- and this time the expansion would not be vertical, into the sky, but horizontal, into the river. Tozzoli proposed taking the dirt excavated from the trade-center construction site and creating a brand-new piece of Manhattan -- he would pour it into an enclosure in the Hudson River right next to where the center would be built. The complex, run by its own authority, would be called Battery Park City. Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, eager to help the trade-center project, would soon propose putting thousands of state-sponsored apartments in Battery Park City,

along with yet another cluster of huge office skyscrapers. Tobin was delighted, and he touted the new chunk of Manhattan as "the brainchild of Guy Tozzoli." Lindsay was promised millions in new fees from the development there, and his negotiator, Deputy Mayor Robert Price, finally extracted from the Port Authority an increase in payments for the original trade-center site. The city and the authority struck a tentative deal in August 1966.

The World Trade Center survived, but it emerged a behemoth. One crucial piece of its ultimate demise -- its attraction as a target -- was in place. But the trade center was still just an abstraction, an overwhelming quantity of space. What the Port Authority needed now was someone to turn Tozzoli's big number -- 10 million square feet -- into an unmistakable part of the Manhattan skyline.

Go to the next chapter

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