New York City

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Preface: Time and the City

When I reread this book for its U.S. edition, I felt that a chapter was missing, and acutely so: indeed, no book on a metropolis (and on New York City in particular) can do without a chapter on “Time.” Because time is different in a metropolis: its pace is different, as are its rhythms, its moments and the way they speed up and slow down; so too is the temporal span between sunrise and sunset, between sunset and sunrise, and all the segments contained therein—the way they follow after each other and together constitute such a different timetable. Above all, time is change, and change is what makes a metropolis (any metropolis, but—again—New York City in particular) a living organism, subject to an ongoing cycle of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth—not the frozen exhibit of lines and volumes, shapes and profiles, lifeless artifacts and empty proclamations, which all too often passes itself off as a “metropolis” on the pages of glossy magazines. How, then, to reckon with time and change in New York City? This book was written in 1997, published in Italy in 1998, and translated into English in 2003, and so many things have since changed: how to take them into account? How to recover them and place them within the context of a book whose purpose, from the beginning—from its very inception—was to avoid as far as possible a flat and stiff image of the city?

A chapter on “Time” (I told myself) would have to embrace micro—as well as macro—phenomena. For instance: murals and gardens have been disappearing, or continue to disappear, all over the city, especially on the Lower East Side, where merciless property developers relentlessly throw their weight around; Charas/El Bohio, the huge community center on East 9th Street that served the needs of one of the most depressed (and simultaneously creative) areas of the city for decades, was scandalously served an eviction order to make room for what will probably become a big luxury condo; the tiny Vejigante Café, replaced by a hairdresser, is no longer there to brighten up El Barrio’s sunny afternoons; people have moved from one job to another, or left the city, disappeared; friends and acquaintances have sadly passed away; love’s labors were lost; other books were written, movies shot, paintings painted, theatricals acted; Petrella Point itself remained a riddle up until a couple of years ago, when the curiosity of an Italian
reader of this book helped me solve it . . . Time ran in the streets of New York.

And then, of course, the most dramatic change of all occurred—9/11/2001. I was in Memphis, Tennessee, driving north to gather material for a new book on the Mississippi River, when everything happened—when the New York skyline exploded before my eyes on the TV screen. Someone in the motel lobby had told me that a hijacking was taking place over New York, and I had gone back to my room and turned on the TV set, just in time to see one of the Twin Towers in flames, and the almost surreal scene of a second airplane crashing into the other tower, and both of them finally collapsing in a silent apocalypse of thick, swollen, rolling white-grey clouds. I remember spending most of the morning in my motel room, between the TV set and the telephone, trying to reach New York and Milan, anxious to learn and understand more of what was happening.

Whether one liked them or not (and frankly I did not), the Twin Towers were a New York icon. The tragedy consumed within and without them, the lives of thousands entrapped in their crumbling walls, not only changed the city's skyline (that would be a purely aesthetical—and rather cynical—consideration) but also our perception of the city, and the city's perception of itself—as a world-city, yes, but in a peculiar way also detached from the world: an impregnable fortress, around which the world revolved, yes, but almost without touching it . . . Now, every time I think (or read) of the Twin Towers, or glance at one of those by now tragically familiar photos, an image comes to my mind, conjured up with a strange force of suggestion by so many evocations and connections: the last sequence of Franklyn J. Schaffner's Planet of the Apes (1968, a movie that is also, so to speak, about New York, and disturbingly so)—the sequence that comes as a shocking revelation to Charlton Heston and his handful of fugitives. And, invariably, in my mind, that sequence is accompanied by the resonating words from one of Henry James's most prescient books, The American Scene (1907), where he compares New York's skyline to "some colossal hair-comb turned upward and so deprived of half its teeth that the others, at their uneven intervals, count doubly as sharp spikes." But of course the issue is a large and complex one, and one that would inevitably take us far from New York, and it cannot be dealt with at length here.

Anyway, how to account for all these changes—the large and the small, the collective and the personal, the soft, inevitable change, and that which is sudden and dramatic? An extremely interesting book edited by Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin, After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City (2002), manages to analyze the 9/11 events and their aftermath also by exploring (or by unearthing, so to speak) what was there before the WTC—that is, by exploring time and change in New York City, by giving back to
the city its status of a living organism, with an all too often forgotten (even hidden) past. But what to do with a book written before such momentous (or, as the case may be, seemingly insignificant) changes? How to introduce the continuous flow of time in the fixed format of a printed book? I resolved to modify the text slightly here and there, in order to acknowledge and incorporate the most significant transformations. I rewrote some passages in order to introduce a kind of perspective, a sort of time distancing. I used parentheses and past tenses. I mentioned tragedies great and small. But even so, the fact remains that a chapter on “Time” is missing from this book. And maybe—just think for a moment—it is quite appropriate that it be missing. Perhaps it would have been impossible to write it—an endeavor comparable to that of Achilles racing with the turtle. Maybe I would have ended up in a Tristram Shandy situation—trying to tell the life of a city and always being left behind by that very life. Maybe it would have been a useless attempt to freeze “Time,” thus denying it. Maybe the book as it is, written then, read now, is itself a testimony to time and change in New York City.

So, perhaps the best way to “write” it is to leave the reader with the task of writing his or her own chapter: his or her own perception of the rhythms of the city, of its ever-changing face, pace, and nature. Perhaps the real, most appropriate chapter on “Time” starts unfolding when a reader opens the book and starts turning its pages. And this, on the part of its author, is surely a wish.

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