

# New York: Forest of Symbols

ANDY MERRIFIELD

New York has an office space problem, a glut. It also has a retail store problem: empty units standing out like missing teeth. Those gaps are everywhere in town, especially in Manhattan, glaring cavities. In many cases, empty stores are directly related to empty offices. Workers no longer in the workplace spell shuttered coffee shops, dry cleaners, lunch restaurants and bars, even newsstands – those small businesses that once served commuting office workers. New York’s Comptroller’s Office reckons vacant commercial premises across Manhattan have seen a sharp hike; in some parts of midtown, one in three retail spaces now lie fallow.

New York’s incumbent mayor, ex-police officer Eric Adams, has been pushing for a recovery plan based on thousands of workers returning to their offices in midtown and lower Manhattan. The city’s 1.3 million private-sector office workers, the mayor says, need to get back to their desks. He wants crowds returning to central business districts – workers breakfasting, lunching, and dining there again, as well as supporting small enterprises that disappear quickly without sustained patronage.

Adams’s mantra, though, is falling on deaf corporate ears. Some of the city’s biggest firms are urging employees otherwise. The management consultancy giant PricewaterhouseCoopers told its 40,000-strong workforce it can work remotely forever. Law firms and publishers like Penguin-Random House are following suit. Spotify has a seventeen-year lease on sixteen floors at 4 World Trade Center at \$2.8 million a month but told its staff they can “live anywhere in the US.”<sup>1</sup> Facebook voiced likewise to its thousands of New York-based employees, throwing into question what will happen to their home at midtown’s James A. Farley Building. The insurance company TIAA, telecommunications giant Verizon, and big tech firms such as Google are all instigating hybrid working practices, insisting that there is no compulsion to get back to the office. JPMorgan Chase, New York’s largest private-sector employer, said only half of its 271,000 employees would return to the office five days a week. Despite the mayor’s pleas, an in-person work life looks like a blast from the past, not a glimmer of hope for the future.

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The decline of Manhattan office workers is set to disrupt New York's collective life. For one thing, it threatens to undermine the city's real estate-reliant tax base – overly reliant tax base, one might say. Pre-COVID, office buildings in Manhattan supplied more than a quarter of New York City's property-tax revenue – money used to fund public schools, police, parks, and public infrastructure. With 19 percent of Manhattan's office space available for lease – a near record high – the dark days of the 1970s fiscal crisis loom.

Downtown, 21 percent of offices have no tenant. And, without a regular stream of commuters, the region's mass transit systems are facing even greater budget cuts, disproportionately harming those workers who still travel to work. Reduced funding means poorer service and facilities. During the April 2022 subway shooting in Brooklyn, none of the station's CCTV cameras functioned. Rising subway crime also presents real and imagined obstacles to sustained usage, persuading many New Yorkers to think otherwise, if they can, about the daily commute.

Yet while office occupancy dips, the city's residential property values and rents soar, somehow defying gravity. Vast swaths of the city's public life are destined soon to deteriorate, languishing because of lack of funding; still, private-sector rents rose 33 percent between January 2021 and January 2022. In neighborhoods like Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Manhattan's Upper West Side, 40 percent spikes have been reported. Average sales prices for Manhattan apartments jumped 12 percent during the first quarter of 2022.<sup>2</sup> This seems inexplicable, even obscene, when so much of the city still reels from COVID.

After offering discounts, landlords are beginning to turn the screw again. For tenants who stayed through the first two years of pandemic, the goodwill is over, and returnees will have to pay even more than they did before they left. Property owners say they're trying to regain lost income and compensate for escalating costs of utilities and property. These hikes have only worsened the city's chronic unaffordability problem. Over 50,000 people currently live in city homeless shelters; at least 5,000 make do – or not – on the streets. Homeless encampments across the city have been aggressively dismantled by the New York Police Department, the Department of Sanitation, and the Department of Homeless Services. The mayor is keen to highlight the “moral failings” of homelessness and claims to clear away encampments for the residents' own good.

Meanwhile, converting New York's 700 underutilized hotels into affordable housing encounters legal and technical barriers. A new \$100 million fund to motivate developers to convert empty hotels into residences sits unused because of regulatory red tape. Here, as with flexible work mod-

els, city policymakers have been slow off the mark, hardly grappling with what all this portends for the city's future. New York state has yet to relax zoning regulations, further hampering the conversion of office space into residential housing, including accommodation for low-income New Yorkers. So it goes.



I walked past Kurt Vonnegut's former townhouse the other day on East Forty-Eighth Street, a narrow, white, three-story building, mid-block between Second and Third avenues. I was thinking about the expression he'd made famous in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "so it goes." In the novel, the alien Tralfamadorians utter the phrase each time they encounter a dead person – as would Vonnegut himself, he wrote. But I wasn't thinking so much about corpses that day, though I easily could have been – Russian shells were raining on the Ukraine, much as Allied firebombs had destroyed Dresden in 1945. Instead, I was thinking about Vonnegut's expression in conjunction with something I'd read in the *New York Times*, rolling my eyes because of the awful familiarity of it: urban policy reverting to its old playbook of quack ideas. I'd been hearing this stuff for decades. So it goes.

New York, like elsewhere in the United States – really, like everywhere in the world – excels at doling out huge amounts of public money to line the pockets of an already-immensely wealthy private sector. The *New York Times* that morning was reporting on how Albany had planned to foot the bill for a new billion-dollar football stadium in the city of Buffalo, despite the fact that the Buffalo Bills had lost four straight Super Bowls. Critics damned this spectacular deal – costing New York state \$600 million and Buffalo's Erie County an additional \$250 million – as an egregious case of corporate welfare, which forked out huge sums of public, taxpayers' money to subsidize a team owned by billionaires.<sup>3</sup>

It's miraculous how the state readily finds money for private industry while crying poverty for public services. So it goes. Even pro-capitalist economists wonder about the effects new mega-projects like the stadium have on civic bottom lines. "Large subsidies commonly devoted to constructing professional sports venues aren't justified," the critics say, "as worthwhile public investments." Much the same can be said about other mega-projects.<sup>4</sup>

The most egregious of these mega-projects is Hudson Yards. This twelve-acre site, west of Penn Station and Madison Square Garden, had once been gritty rail tracks and storage yards for Long Island Rail Road trains. Completion isn't slated until 2024, yet much of the complex is already in place. Connected to the High Line and a revamped subway

station, Hudson Yards is meant to be the pride and joy of a post-9/11 Big Apple, a celebration of Michael Bloomberg's mayoral years, his bleeding edge: New York, Inc.

The \$25 billion mega-plan brings with it shingled, blue-glass skyscrapers, office space, deluxe condos, and high-end retail galore, to say nothing of an eco-arts center and bizarre pedestrian walkway called "The Vessel." But one of the most startling of Hudson Yards' scams is reputed to have garnered some \$1.6 billion in financing, and has only quite recently become public news. It centers on the controversial investor visa program called the EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program.<sup>5</sup>

The program lets super-rich foreign elites secure visas in exchange for investment in the U.S. economy. These investors pump hundreds of thousands of dollars into real estate, enabling them to gain no-questions-asked fast-track visas. The invested monies are supposed to go to poor and distressed neighborhoods across the United States, federally designated zones known as Targeted Employment Areas (TEAs).

But the boundaries of these TEAs are loose, open to meddling and manipulation. In New York, Empire State Development—a public-private organization under the banner of state government—is the arch-meddler and manipulator. It managed to secure TEA status for Hudson Yards, stretching its remit into poor census tracts of Harlem. As such, funds intended for real estate aid in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, like Harlem, were siphoned off and redirected into a super-luxury mega-development. "Think of it as a form of creative financial gerrymandering," journalist Kriston Capps described it. This is how developer Related Companies raked in around \$380 million at Hudson Yards, bypassing distressed-area scrutiny with greedy audacity. (And, by the way, the ex-president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, had been busily promoting Kushner Companies' projects with EB-5 investors in China.) So it goes.

In New York's post-COVID workplace, "bleeding edge" takes on a rather different significance. Vampires have sucked the city dry. There's nothing left to bleed: empty offices and stores bereft of people characterize Hudson Yards, feeling a lot like the collapse of the dot.com sector in the 2000s, highlighted in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. Depopulated officescapes, unused cubicles in open-plan ghost spaces, gather dust. "Eerily deserted," said the *New York Times*.<sup>6</sup>

Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates' one hundred-floor pinnacle office and residential building at 30 Hudson Yards—taller than the Empire State Building—has around 500,000 square feet of unleased office space, casting a dark shadow across the glitzy development. Hundreds of its condos remain unsold. With vast unpaid debts, which now include a \$16 million

claim for breaking its lease, retail anchor tenant Neiman Marcus recently filed for bankruptcy. At least four other upscale stores and several restaurants have likewise gone belly up.<sup>7</sup>

When I strolled around Hudson Yards one lovely spring afternoon, the High Line was packed with people basking in the sunshine. Yet they were voting with their feet. Inside the shopping mall, crowds thinned to a trickle. Listless shoppers aimlessly wandered the massive complex. Everything felt alienating, unlived in, and dehumanized. The giant Whole Foods Market felt processed, supersized, starkly empty of organic humankind. Passivity prevailed in Hudson Yards' rarefied air, both inside and out. In the chilly, open-air shade, a small group of overseas tourists gathered at the base of the Vessel. They looked bored, puzzled why the structure was off-limits to visitors. Maybe they didn't know the Vessel's true claim to fame?

The Vessel first closed in January 2021, immediately after a 21-year-old man leapt to his death from the 16-story spiral staircase. The previous December, a 24-year-old Brooklyn woman had similarly jumped, following the death of a 19-year-old New Jersey man – the inaugural suicide – in February 2019. Witnesses said there had been prolonged screaming as onlookers realized in horror what had happened. And just two months after the Vessel reopened, in May 2021, amid a fanfare about a design overhaul to lessen the risk of suicides, a 14-year-old boy plunged to his death. Inexplicably, the height of the railings around the walkways, barely chest-high, hadn't been altered.

Police confirmed the May death as a fourth suicide. Initially “envisioned as a shared, immersive design experience,” the Vessel's future remains uncertain. It was meant to be Hudson Yards' quirky, \$200 million centerpiece, the brainchild of billionaire real estate developer Stephen M. Ross of Related Companies; instead, the Vessel may well be a tragic metaphor of our anxious age, when so many young people are deciding to end it all – and when so many other people have become so disgustingly rich. So it goes.



One of my favorite New York pastimes, besides walking its streets, is sitting on the bench in front of Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I've always thought it a rather marvelous painting, the product of Pollock's tremendously productive year of 1950. Its black and white skeins and swirls, spirals and splatters, drips and dollops of paint, poured from coffee cans and spilt from wooden sticks, engulf this vast seventeen-by-eight-foot brown canvas. *Autumn Rhythm*

radiates an immense electrical charge, a kinetic energy that always seemed to me quintessentially urban, even though Pollock executed it on the floor of a small-town Long Island barn.

In a sense, this canvas represents the crisis of the classic framing of the city, wrenching us away from how the Impressionists depicted city life, especially Paris, with blurry, shifting brush-stroke movements, which are always bound by a coherence, a pictorial ordering, a certain perspective on the city's center and edges. With Pollock, this linear ordering is obliterated. He allows us to glimpse deregulated capitalism unleashed, whirring before you, with its spirals of capital sloshing around the globe, creating nodal points that gel as cities – as spaces like Hudson Yards – that flow into circuits of real estate development and global money markets. Here is a graphic depiction of contemporary finance capitalism in motion.

A decade or so ago, when the Occupy Wall Street movement was taking hold across the globe, I had another idea about Pollock's imagery: that it was equally a representation of resistance and a pictorial depiction of the act of *fusion*, of people coming together; that those great whirls and curves, puddles and dribbles, those wiggly threads of splattered black and white paint were actually points of convergence, nodal spaces that people occupied, and in which blazed new territories of possibility, connecting with one another. Indeed, Pollock was illustrating nothing less than a radical geography of mass encounter.

Now, though, sitting in front of *Autumn Rhythm* in April 2022, I had another thought about what Pollock might mean. Maybe it has something to do with *autumn*, which had never occurred to me before. When somebody once asked Pollock how he represented nature in his paintings, he famously responded, "*I am nature.*" Maybe now we can grasp autumn as implicit in the picture, autumn as a season when things fall from trees, when nature dies off and rots, only to nourish the earth as mulch for future growth.

This rethink was likely prompted by a memoir I'd been reading then, by the Canadian forest ecologist Suzanne Simard: *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, published in 2021. Simard noticed how commercial logging hacked down diverse old forests and replaced them with homogeneous plantations, stripping the soil of its underbrush. The logic went that, without competitors and with more space for light and water, young saplings would thrive. But they didn't. Instead, they frequently withered and died, proving more vulnerable to disease and climatic stress than trees in entangled ancient forests.

Simard discovered that the reason lies in *mycorrhizal networks*, the thread-like fungi that envelop and fuse with trees. These fungi pass nutrients, such as phosphorous and nitrogen, to the trees, and help extract

the water required for photosynthesis. Around 90 percent of trees depend on these mysterious underground mycorrhizal networks (*mykes* is the Greek word for fungus and *rhiza*, root) that link trees, even trees of different species, sharing life and knitting together the earth's soils in a complex system of symbiosis.

Mycorrhizal networks are delicate gossamer webs of tiny threads. If we were to dig underground, we'd not only see them as tissue stitching together much life on Earth: we'd also glimpse an intricate fractal patterning resembling Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. We'd see his painted spirals and whirls, his nodes and synapses, as the constitutive ingredient of these mycorrhizal webs: the mystical and magical substance called *mycelium*. If you teased apart the mycelium found in a teaspoon of soil, it might stretch to over a mile of thread. Mycelium operates more as a process than a thing, possessing an innate directional memory that spreads outwards radially, forming a spidery circle of filaments in all directions.

Mycelium expands until it touches something, finds something to latch on to, to feed on and nourish. This something can be dead or alive, organic or inorganic, decaying and decomposing – not only tree roots and plants, but old books and carpets, bits of wood and floorboards, trash and food waste, moldy wallpaper, even cigarette butts. Half-jokingly, Simard says that these material filaments of mycelium constitute the “*Wood Wide Web*,” nature's very own broadband, traversing humus subsoil everywhere. Channels for resource exchange and communication are here always open, without tariff or subscription. In this otherworldly kingdom, the “internet of things” is nothing new: “smart” forests have been around for thousands of years.

Loggers replacing diverse forests with homogeneous plantations sounds uncannily like the dynamics of today's urban environments, where developers similarly impose homogeneity on messy human woodland, hacking through the city's old growth, disturbing well-established urban ecologies. Stripped bare of human undersoil, devoid of any selfless life, our cities also wither from frailty. Only the richest survive in privately managed enclaves that exhibit little biodiversity. In these new forest wildernesses, people are forced to compete with one another in labor markets and pit themselves against each other in unaffordable housing markets. Our human mycorrhizal networks have long been uprooted.

Mega-projects alter the metabolism of city life and, directly or indirectly, kill off the city's old-growth forest. That forest probably required some sort of nourishment; it was likely already becoming contaminated by invasive management. But now it is gone, the city has less undergrowth than before, less resilience, and is set to wither like the newly laid forests Simard

witnessed in commercial “fast-food” forestry. Trees are dependent on their connection to the soil and to one another, just like buildings and humans. We too exist in a complex web of social relations between ourselves and surrounding objects. Demolishing and upscaling buildings severs this symbiosis, disrupts the organic balance between people and people and between people and buildings – between human space and physical space. In the social world, there are also mycorrhizal networks that shape life. They offer support and cooperation, supply nutrients to people, especially to the weakest, and sustain the social structure of a shared soil.

Maybe we need another program for urban forests, a city equivalent of Jean Giono’s brilliant narrative from 1953, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, about the French shepherd who disseminated hundreds of acorns over four decades, turning a Provençal wilderness into a wooded Garden of Eden. If only our developers and planners thought this way. Giono’s account was so compelling that many people believed the selfless shepherd existed. Here was a man who cared about what surrounded him, a public figure whose environmental management became a nurturing labor of love. His was a peasant’s view of forest management, and perhaps we need a peasant’s view of city management, too, like the peasant of Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926).

This surrealist classic gives us similar ideas about forestry management – but its thicket is a dense city. The book is a field manual about how we might treasure and preserve what we have in this urban forest, before it’s too late; Aragon’s beloved arcade, Passage de l’Opéra, was then about to be demolished to extend the Boulevard Haussmann. Aragon had sauntered many times beneath the passageway’s glass canopy, tapping its hidden mysteries and charms. He delighted in the outmoded, in what one could find in the city’s undergrowth. The peasant’s Paris is a city full of trees and mossy old growth, constantly under assault. Its “glowing woodland” is, Aragon says, perennially getting supplanted by commercial forestry, destroying much of the quirky, eccentric shrub life nestled within it.

The peasant is born on the land, is of the land, and lives off the land. Only in this case, it’s the city landscape we are talking about; how we might cultivate an urban garden, one belonging to the whole community; how we might collectively sustain our “enchanted forest”; how we might dig away at it, manage it, and renew it, without destroying its spell. The life of Aragon’s peasant is hauntingly poetic, full of dreams. But while the peasant’s dream is poetic, it is neither idealist nor abstractly philosophical. The world of the peasantry is practical and concrete. They pragmatically labor the land, doggedly struggling for survival.



And that's how we might cultivate our urban policy, how we must foster our mycorrhizal networks and our relationship between buildings and streets—the complex ecosystem that constitutes our public realm. This is our shared forest, the surroundings that form our habitat—the one we work on and work with; the one we make and frequently break. Over eons of symbiosis and coevolution, our natural forests have grown tall. They were once small, puny, yet developed over time into a collective form of life that is mighty and magnanimous. Can we imagine our urban history rising to such luminous heights? Could we ever imagine a peasant dreaming of towering office space?

### Notes

1. Dana Rubinstein and Nicole Hong, "Fewer Workers Planning to Return, Hurting Manhattan's Comeback," *New York Times*, April 12, 2022.
2. Mihir Zaveri, "Rents are Roaring Back in New York City," *New York Times*, March 7, 2022.
3. Jesse McKinley, "Public Foots Most of the \$1.4 Billion for a Stadium. Buffalo Fans Cheer," *New York Times*, April 16, 2022.
4. McKinley, "Public Foots Most of the \$1.4 Billion for a Stadium."
5. See Kriston Capps, "The Hidden Horror of Hudson Yards Is How It Was Financed," *CityLab*, April 12, 2019.
6. Matthew Haag and Dana Rubinstein, "How the Pandemic Left the \$25 Billion Hudson Yards Eerily Deserted," *New York Times*, February 6, 2021.
7. Haag and Rubinstein, "How the Pandemic Left the \$25 Billion Hudson Yards Eerily Deserted."

## MONTHLY REVIEW

*Fifty Years Ago*

So far as the underdeveloped countries are concerned, foreign investment with its attendant transfer of surplus to the developed countries, is undoubtedly an important factor, but it is very far from being the only or even the main cause of underdevelopment. More concretely, the expropriation of foreign owned assets and the retention in the country of whatever surplus they may help to generate, are necessary but by no means sufficient conditions for the launching of a genuine process of development. If the government in the expropriating country remains in the hands of the same old ruling classes, the consequence will be that these local exploiters will be enriched, not that the impoverished masses will be benefited. Only if it is the result of, or accompanied by, a real social revolution, i.e., the transfer of political power from owners to workers, will the expropriation of foreign investment help to lay the ground for development which is worthy of the name.

—PAUL SWEETZ,

"On the Irrelevance of Bourgeois Economics," *Monthly Review*, October 2, 1972.