

Sky Scrape

BY FRED STENSON

When terrorists knocked down the twin World Trade Centre towers (and let me be the several millionth person to note there is absolutely nothing funny about that), Donald Trump was one of those who thought something should be built on the spot that would be a fitting tribute to those who died. His idea: build the world's tallest building. He was thinking it was the kind of project he and his billions might like to take on.

My opinion: file this under Failure to Learn.

Was there ever anything to commend skyscrapers, besides the hubris of climbing into the sky? The idea of the skyscraper has been on the mind of humankind since the Old Testament character went to sleep with his head on a rock and imagined a staircase reaching into heaven on which people and angels climbed and descended. It made a fine Bible story, which has stuck with me exactly as long as the one about the vain fellow who grew his hair long and was capitolally punished by getting his hair caught around a tree branch while riding a horse under it. But the part



about the dream of the staircase into the sky that impressed my child's mind most was that the dreamer had gone to sleep with his head on a rock. How could anyone sleep with their head on a rock, I asked myself, and I never did think of a way. And, hence, what kind of good ideas are likely to come out of the dream of someone who was sleeping with his head on a rock? The skyscraper, that's what.

I submit that all the trouble we are experiencing with skyscrapers began there in the first human imagining one. Perhaps the night Donald Trump dreamt of replacing the WTC towers

with the tallest building in the world, he too had been sleeping with his head on a rock.

Then came the Tower of Babel, which as I recall wasn't a real success either. Although language was the issue there—the confusion of many languages and not enough translators—it did happen in a tower. If the people would have been not in a tower but sensibly arrayed around the flat surface of the earth, they wouldn't have come in contact much and the fact that they could not communicate would not have mattered much.

I remember learning various facts about skyscrapers.

First, there was my maiden ascent of one, the CN Tower in Edmonton as I recall. I went into someone's office to visit and was told, "The windows do not open." Why not, I asked. "Because someone might jump out." This I took as a hint that working in a skyscraper might not be a source of daily joy. Then there was a secondary theory offered that open windows in a skyscraper would cause strange air currents within the building, perhaps causing people to be sucked or blown out. Good enough for me as

a set of reasons as to why windows could not be made to open there, but my desire to be in one, certainly to work in one, diminished.

That was in the good old days when we could all smoke inside the hermetically sealed office towers. I remember the heaping ashtrays, the blue air, the white-with-a-yellowing colour of the people who worked there. I smoked then too, adding my share of unbreathability to the atmosphere. Taxpayers with no history of asthma would visit and fall down dead while trying to sort out bureaucratic mistakes in their applications for a fishing licence.

The total absence of fresh air for one's entire working life struck me as a reason to find employment closer to the ground.

Then I remember the day that skyscrapers started looking ratty inside. Early on, of course, they were all new, inside and out, but after a while they started to get that look that bars get after the four millionth person has walked across the carpet. The freshly painted stairwells get nicked and scratched and have those black rubber streaks as though someone has been kicking them to the height of six feet with new rubber-soled shoes. The photos and framed degrees on the walls come and go with firings and retirements until lots of holes and different speeds of stain and paint fade are visible. The acoustical panels that compose the ceiling get brown water stains from the occasional accidents when water starts to dribble through the invisible layers. It all gets Orwellian-looking. Post-war British-looking.

Then someone gets the brilliant idea to paint, and because the air can't go anywhere except up into vents plugged with hair and skin, it stays inside the room for as long as paint takes to dry and detoxify, during which time everyone, besides bad colour, gets that defocused look, the pinched look, that goes with having a screaming headache for seven-and-a-half hours a day for two weeks. Some

people, mind you, aren't affected by the paint. These are the people who already had headaches and have had for years because of the cost-efficient fluorescent lights flickering at the speed of imminent bipolarism.

That also put me off, as well as causing me to ask someone who I thought should know what the life span of a modern skyscraper was. "Twenty-five years," he said, proudly. Twenty-five years? The Acropolis has stood for several thousand years, the Pyramids at Giza somewhat longer. Twenty-five years? That's well worth putting thousands of tons of concrete into the sky, isn't it?

Then there's the whole matter of elevators: getting stuck in elevators; elevators that lurch from side to side as they go up and down; elevators full of graffiti; elevators recently painted to get rid of the graffiti; being in elevators with people who are frightened to death of elevators; people who have bad breath and other objectionable body odours; who crowd tightly into elevators, then, aloud of course, start calculating whether or not you are exceeding the legal weight limit for this elevator; elevators that don't quite stop even with the floor. Enough said.

Then there was the day I went downtown and was walking along and saw there were wooden tunnels built on the sidewalks surrounding a brand new office tower. The top was wood, as were the supporting pillars, and the sides were wire mesh. The reason they were there was because, for some reason which the architect and building contractor were just having the darnedest time figuring out, the giant orange reflecting windows had taken to spontaneously falling out, sometimes from a height of 20 or 30 storeys, and smashing in the street. Despite being assured that no one had yet been injured by a falling window, I had to wonder what it was like for the people who narrowly escaped death the day the first few windows fell. Smash! "I'll be darned, Bob. You don't see that every day, do you?"

To say nothing of the whole matter of the number of people who probably chose to jump when they saw the opening, and the others who were blown and sucked around violently by the resulting internal winds.

But I have often been told that skyscrapers are technologically miraculous. I worked in one in the mid-1980s whose brag was that it was amazingly energy efficient insofar as heating and cooling and humidity were concerned. Sunlight passing through the glass heated the building, but the interior was prevented from getting too hot because it had a huge fountain out front. Air from around the fountain was circulated through the building, cooling and humidifying it without the burning of any fossil fuel. It was applauded as an environmentally successful building, a building of the future.

I remember often working late in that building, and thinking, "I'm getting sick. Look how clammy I am. Damp to the touch. Feverish yet cool." But, no, ha, ha, I was not sick. I was heated, cooled and humidified by air that smelled like it does when you take a tire to the repairman and he pries it off and turns it inside out.

As you might have figured out, I'm not a big fan of the skyscraper. Could we not plead with our makers of cities to knock it off? Give us a few square miles of three-storey buildings with gardens on top and openable windows in all seasons and no bloody elevators unless you absolutely need one or are carrying a piano. Give us courtyards full of natural greenery instead of the poor mutant plants on the 25th floor that are rushed out when they start to die before any of the already depressed workers can see them.

Maybe, so Donald Trump won't get his feelings hurt, we could build his tallest building in the world, and just not tell him we're placing it on its side.

Fred Stenson's book *The Trade* has made the long list for the world's richest literary prize in English fiction, the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.