



Article

## **Being (back) There:** Travel sketches that evoke a previous temporality

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During the recent Covid-19 lockdown I stumbled upon a sketchbook of my first trip overseas (a 3-month stay in the USA in 1986) – more particularly my 6-week long stay in Manhattan, (the most European of the US cities – where one didn't need a car to get around). Revisiting these sketches took me back, to the quiet times of finding a place, looking, seeing, listening, and sketching in-situ with just a Rotring pen and sketch book. All the while, people were going about their daily business, largely ignoring me. Was it because I was so still? Or was it because they were rushing with their 'Man-hectic' lives. My lingering longer was required for such drawings, in contrast to the 'click' of an SLR camera and moving on to the next tourist tick stop. These visual scribblings trigger (for me at least) long forgotten memories of that previous temporality of being in an eye-opening 24/7 urbanity, with all its attendant smells, sights and sounds. The accompanying texts will unpack these nuances in an attempt to show how hand sketching remains experiential and visceral in contrast to the uber-paced virtual world we now find ourselves in.

In 1986, after graduating with an architecture degree and just three years' experience in an architects' office, I had my sights set on Architecture (with a capital "A"). I wanted to see destinations that just had to be tracked down. It was a pilgrimage really; one had to go to see those spaces and places in-situ with one's mind and one's soul, because (as it turned out) the reality was always different from the images in the lecture theatre slides and in books. Who would have guessed that the Chrysler Building entry lobby was in reality so small, and there was no access to the roof to be up close to the amazingly expressive, stainless steel gargoyles.

"Paris created...the flâneur...[with] that anamnestic intoxication in which the flâneur goes about the city [which] not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge... [not just] dead facts...[rather] something experienced." (Benjamin, 1999, p.417)

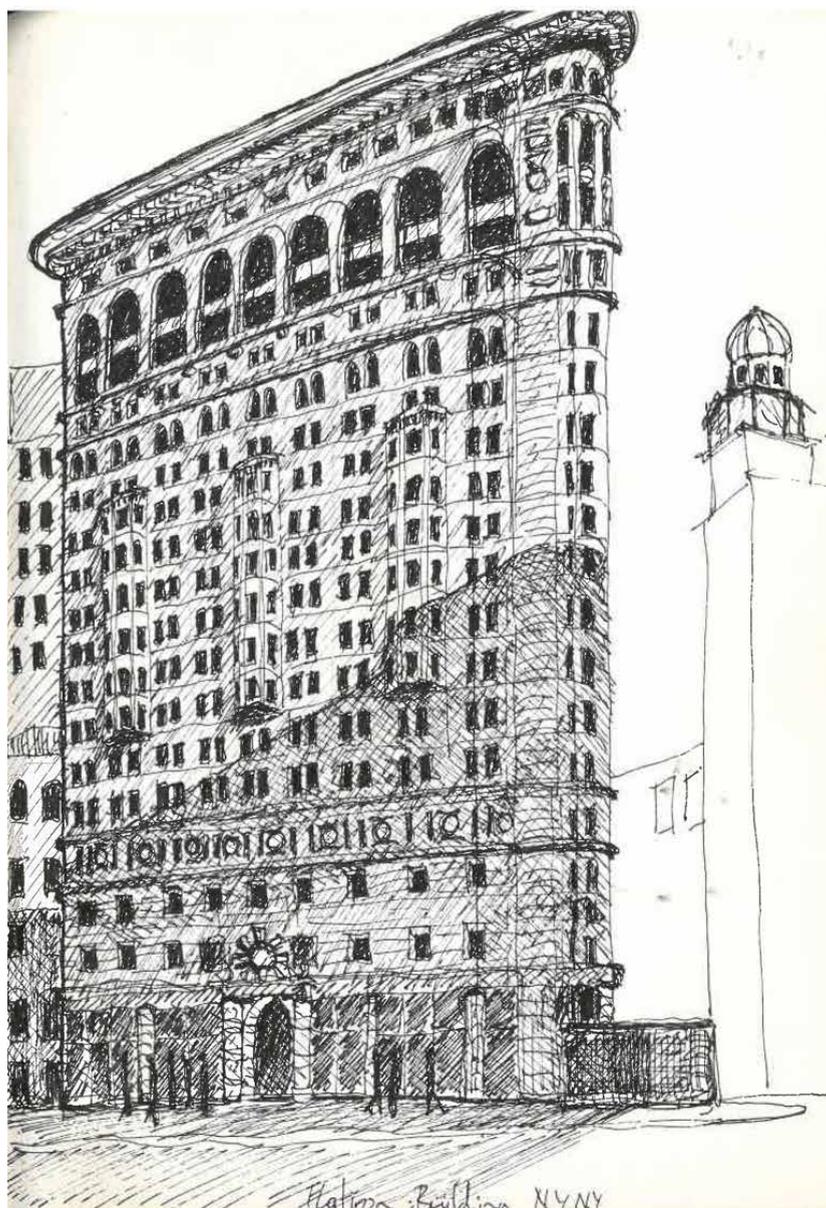


Figure 1: *The Flatiron Building, (formerly the Fuller Building), opened in 1902. Designed by Daniel Burnham and Frederick Dinkelberg, New York, New York,*

One day I strolled downtown (south) into the Flatiron District from the Garment District where I was staying at “The Y”, the Sloane House YMCA on West 34<sup>th</sup> Street, now apartments (Kautz Family YMCA Archives, 1995). Arriving at the confluence where Broadway (originally a Native Indian Wickquasgeck trail) crosses Fifth Avenue just south of Madison Square Park, there stood the triangular plan shape of the ‘Flatiron’ Building with its terracotta cladding hanging like some old grand duke’s greatcoat (complete with hip-flask bulging bay window pockets). Settling onto a park bench (with the ‘CRACK’ of a baseball bat on ball from the park behind), I started to sketch.

Perhaps the reader will know that the original lifts in the Flatiron Building were Otis water hydraulic elevators, powered by water pressure and subject to both extremely slow travel times and regular flooding. “The elevators were so slow that one executive [claimed] you could read an entire [book] manuscript while waiting for one and then riding it up. Mr. Murphy lived in a high-rise right across the street from the Flatiron for 15 years. ‘My commute,’ he said, ‘was a half hour.’” (Stapinski, 2010).

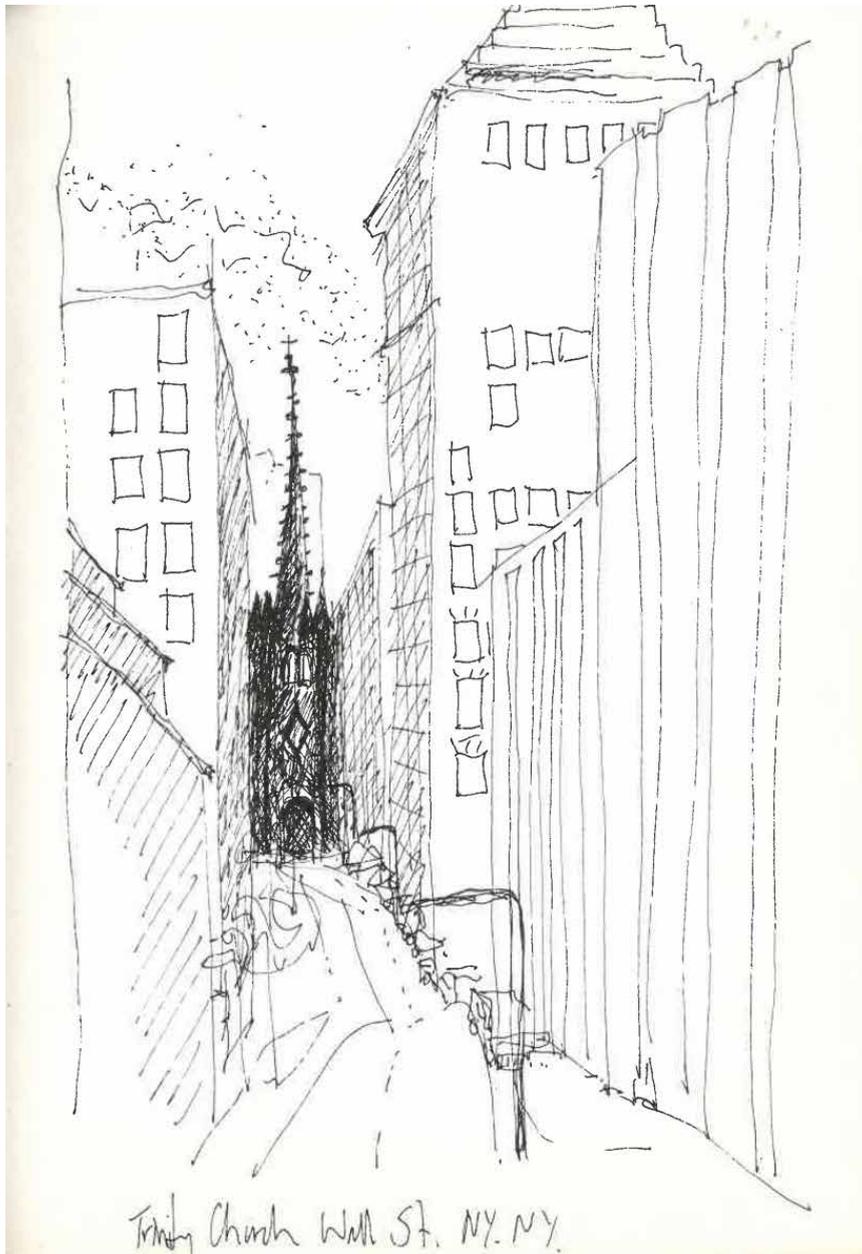


Figure 2: *Trinity Church*, completed in 1846 to the design of Richard Upjohn, New York, New York,

Another day, up early and downtown to witness the CLANG CLANG CLANG of the opening bells of Wall Street's Trading Hall and watch the ensuing gesturing and shouting over paper we all call money (here known as the 'Greenback'). Afterwards, stumbling back outside. No green there; rather the adjacent Trinity Church with its aspiring spire (and attendant graveyard) set within a canyon of moneyed real estate. There it still sits, quietly pious at the west end of Wall Street, the first Episcopal parish's "brownstones" seemingly oblivious to the dance of the money-men close by.

Hungry after all this downtown walking, I would hunt out a cut-slice pizza shop. In those days of 1986 you got a slice of pizza for US\$1.00 (takeaway price). I marvelled at how smartly dressed male (and some female) New Yorkers could walk along the sidewalk (footpath) with their large floppy pizza slice folded down the middle (rather like how one corrugates sheet steel to strengthen it and form a walkable roofing material). How wonderfully architectural these New Yorker food gobbling office workers were!

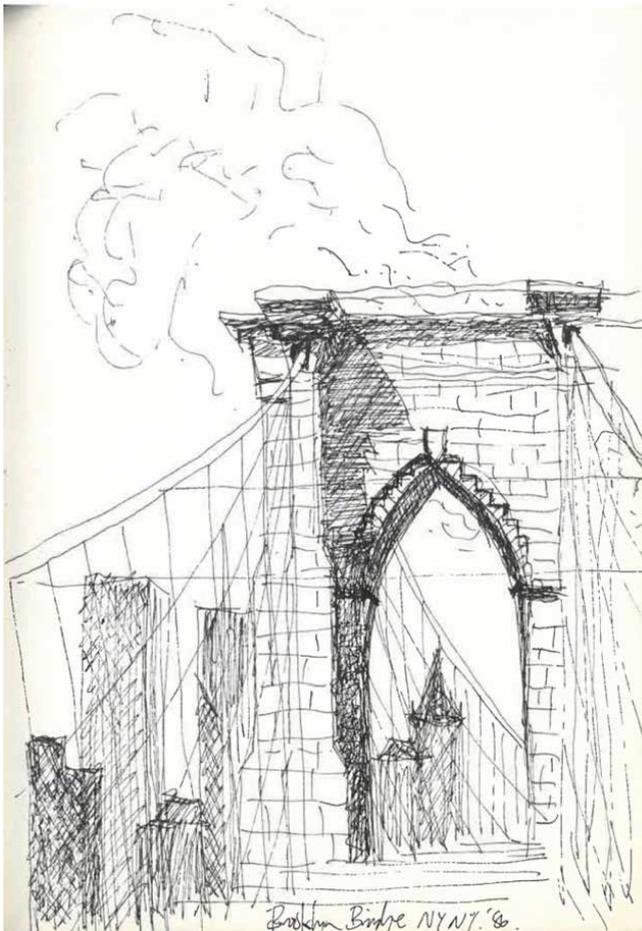


Figure 3: *Brooklyn Bridge* 1867-83, by John A. Roebling and Washington Roebling, spanning the East River between Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Whilst wandering across the Brooklyn Bridge (on a warm August Sunday morning), one learns, surprisingly, that the automobiles (cars) actually swish under the pedestrians' elevated walkway. A weight saving timber boardwalk (rather than a blacktop (asphalt) footpath) supports the stroller and strollers (prams). My 1986 doodle above happens to include the two World Trade towers beyond the spider web of steel suspension cables descending from one of the Gothic pier arches of the bridge. Although mere office blocks, the two modern towers, upright and upstanding, were iconic as symbols of American pride and a "can-do" approach, as is the graceful suspension cable bridge to Brooklyn to this day. The twin tower complex had an underground entry to the eponymous subway station below, designed by the Japanese-American architect Minoru Yamasaki in 1970-71.

Does the reader know that the (tourist visitor) lift up to the 107<sup>th</sup> top floor of the South Tower was like a rocket?

Occupants of the lift were jostled from side-to-side as the car rattled upwards, banging over the guide rail joints in a rather alarming way! It was a relief when the doors opened after the 47-second trip at the so called 'Top of the World' observation deck.

Was it Spooky or prophetic when E.B. White wrote back in 1949:

"The city, [New York] for the first time in its long history is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers...cremate [thousands]." (White, 1949, p.54)

Or had Osama Bin Laden perhaps read E.B. White's little book as well?

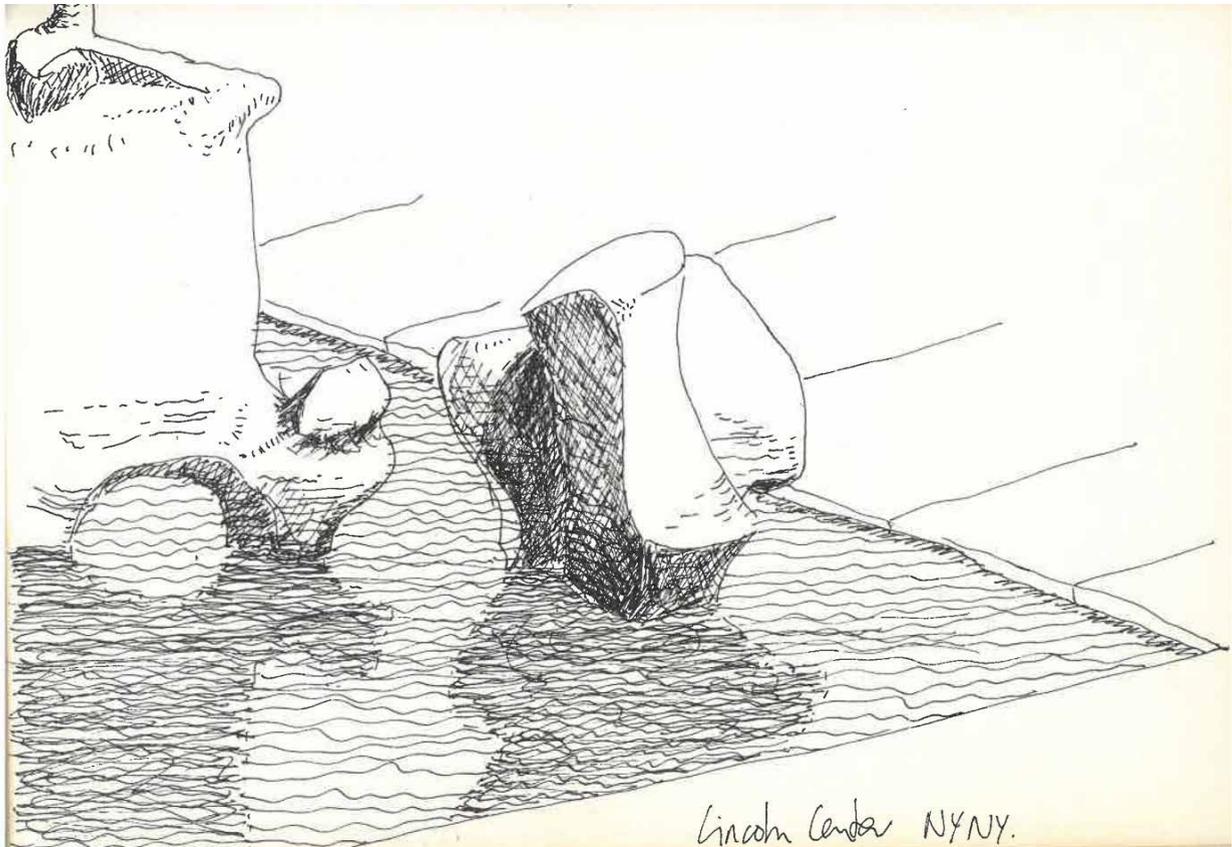


Figure 4: *Reclining Figure*, 1963-65. Bronze by Henry Moore at the Lincoln Center, New York, New York.

This Henry Moore sculptural coupling of patinaed bronze forms with its reflecting pool is to my eyes (and mind) one of the most successful elements of the Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts. The elemental pool set in the North Plaza brings down the scudding clouds and overhead sunshine (ever moving nature) to enliven the heavily gowned granite milieu.

The adjacent New York Metropolitan Opera House (designed by Wallace K. Harrison) was not, and still is not one of Modern Architecture's better moments. 'The Met' building holds two (what should be) fabulous Chagall murals. However, they are compromised by their closeness to the outer glass facade, so much so that the viewer is forced to look uncomfortably upwards (if inside 'The Met'), or view them past the irksome glazing bars when

outside in the plaza. Save your pennies dear reader and go to Paris, and The Paris Opera House (and perhaps sneak in during the daytime), and there crane your head up in awe and savour vast swirling sweeps of "Chagallian" greys in harmony with his other magical painted colours (it will be worth the sore neck). As the French say: *Fantastique*.

By the way: does the reader know that Henry Moore himself was "continually disappointed over the Lincoln Centre sculpture. The water level has never been the height I was told it would be" (Finn, 1977, p.334). Chagall also decided not to compete against the "severe masses of modern American Architecture" (McMullen, 1968, p.238), rather letting his colours and feminine forms contrast against the modernist tableau.

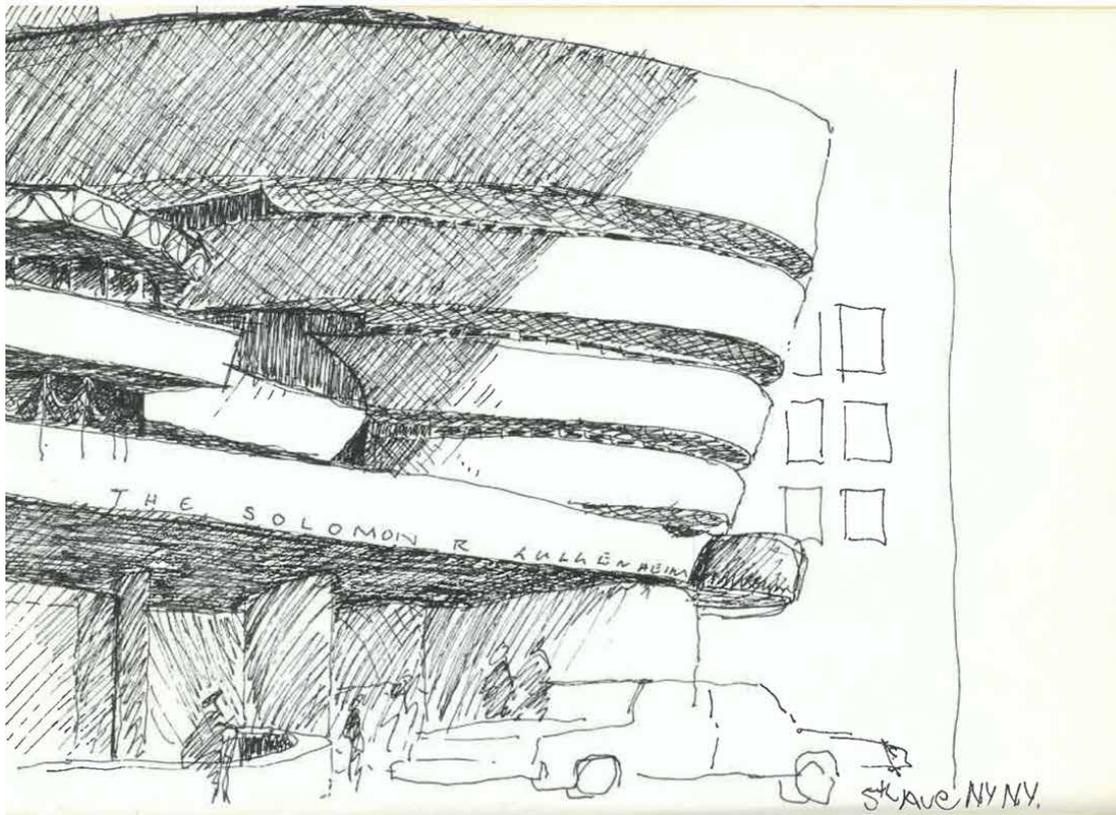


Figure 5: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1959. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, New York, New York.

Aren't 'stretch limos' frustratingly hard to draw!

Another morning, strolling uptown along Fifth Avenue (Central Park on my left), encountering the waft of caramelised onions rising from shiny stainless steel hotdog carts, the pungent smell of bag-ladies pushing all their possessions in a shopping trolley, and being politely and cannily pan-handled by an old-timer for a "quarter or any multiple thereof". On and on, climbing up through the 60's, 70's and 80's (some 30 blocks of Upper East Side). Past 'The Frick' (The Frick Museum holding precious Vermeer's, Rembrandt's and JMW Turner's). Past the Central Park Model Sailing pond with its attendant 1:48 scaled 'Fire-tugboats', complete with hoses that actually squirted water! On up past 'The Met' (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its cavernous Egyptian Room). Past the 'dog walkers' (the paid people streaming into the Park with up to six or seven dogs straining on leashes) taking dogs out for their daily exercise from their nearby owners' 'apartmented' kennels, rather like something out of the pages of *One and Hundred and One Dalmatians*.

To finally arrive at the soft and billowing curves of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Having had my steps governed by the City's right angles for some 40 blocks (the cross streets in combination with the vertical avenues), it was a delightful moment of magic to see the cream coloured (colored) drum rise up off the blacktop in defiance, just as Frank Lloyd Wright wanted it to.

In 1959 - (the early days of elevators (lifts)), FLW's idea was that people rode up to the top floor in the (now tiny) lift and then descended around and down his spiral ramp, taking in all the modern art on display. I concur with those people who think the interior of this great top-lit cone is a far better place for 'people-watching' across the void, rather than viewing art tangentially from a sloping floor. And even strolling close to eavesdrop on other people's artistic "likes and dislikes", although furtive, is a rather fun pastime.

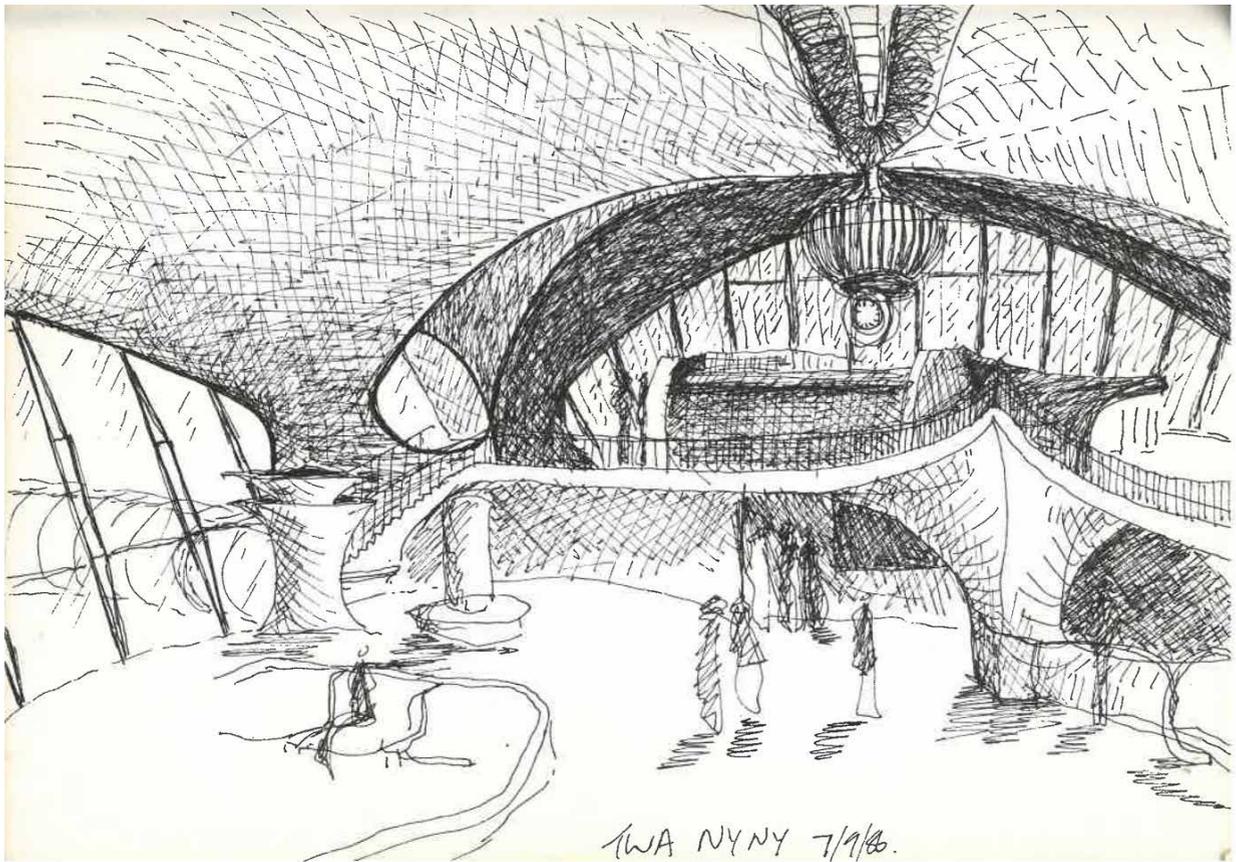


Figure 6: TWA Terminal,1962. Designed by Eero Saarinen and Associates, Queens, New York.

Arriving from Manhattan via the 'J Train' and then shuttle bus to the sculptural Trans World Airlines (TWA) Terminal building, I spent a whole September day inside Saarinen's surprisingly intimate interior. As fellow architect Frederic Schwartz says:

"[I] was born in Queens...a few minutes from JFK (then known as Idlewild Airport)..." The exterior is "soaring and surreal, an expressionistic total 'whammo' of a masterpiece. TWA is the ultimate big bird, ready to soar, a testament of flight and an architect's dream." (Kahn, 2002, p.517-18)

In keeping with the local saying, 'the-times-are-a-changing', "the [TWA] terminal closed in 2001 - along with its namesake Trans World Airlines because it could no longer support the size of modern airplanes...Eighteen years later (May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019) the building was reopened as the 'TWA Hotel'" (Matthews, 2019).

Apparently:

"The TWA Hotel is full of retro details that nod to the terminal's past, but the 512 guest rooms are actually located in a pair of new buildings that flank the historic terminal. In addition to the mid-century modern-inspired furniture and lighting reminiscent of the project's 1962 origins. The minibar is stocked with period-appropriate snacks like Tab soda and Big Hunk candy bars. Be careful though: It's lined with sensors, so if you remove a beverage for more than 30 seconds, your account will be charged." (Matthews, 2019)

The Rotring pen and A5 sized sketchbook became my New York friends, helping me to express my admiration for some of the wondrous architectural forms that make up Manhattan, while my nose, and ears twitched and pricked at the locale. The trio of my eyes, mind, and hand hatched a humbly drawn record of that temporality, of some moments that were New York, New York in August / September 1986.

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