

Chapter 50 - New York (1985)

After migrating to Australia in January 1980, I frequently travelled to Europe and three times to the USA, to make documentaries on German and international contemporary history. I mostly chose subjects I was interested in, like the role the German chemical industry (IG Farben) played in the holocaust and in the post war years; or the secrets behind psychological warfare and propaganda. I was convinced that propaganda in the Second World War had been more effective than officially admitted. I will come back to it.

In 1985 I had the chance to tackle another and still topical matter: The excesses of corporate image building in the USA, which are most visible in the skyscrapers of New York and Chicago. Titled "The highest in the World - Skyscrapers in the twilight" the film dealt mainly with New York's World Trade Centre. In my narration I called it the "world's capital of capital, a cathedral of commerce". It symbolised American trade domination, housing 1000 business enterprises and the world's largest commodity markets. There, the noise was so deafening that brokers had to revert to sign language to do their bids. Words had ceased to be the civilised way of communication. I felt uneasy about this Babylonian nightmare and wondered if it really represented our present day reality, or if it was a highly vulnerable excess of unbounded capitalist forces, which might end in a catastrophe of titanic scale. I did not think of terrorist attacks then, just of an accident, and included a clip of Murnau's film "Metropolis". It shows the consequences of a technology breakdown. The danger I saw was fire. A resident businessman, whom I interviewed, told me that he felt more secure in the twin towers than in any other building. "What I have read in European newspapers, that these skyscrapers are not secure, is absolute nonsense", he said. At the Twin Towers security centre I was told that there were 500 fire alarms a year, but only five of them posed serious danger. Still, I turned to New York's fire-fighters to hear their opinion. I was passed on to "Rescue 1", the crack brigade. Its main task is to save fire-fighters who are themselves in trouble. The following are excerpts from my interview with George Kreuzer of "Rescue 1":

Q: "What is your personal experience? Is there such a thing as a fireproof building?"

A: "No, there isn't. The materials the building is made of are non-combustible, but the contents are combustible and are made of modern materials, plastics of all sorts. They all burn and give off toxic gases besides flames. No, there is no such a thing as a fire-proof building".

Q: "Is there a chance that a high-rise-building fire gets out of control?"

A: "Yes. In the modern high-rises there are vertical voids for the pipes and for wires. It is possible that a fire could become out of control as a result of the voids."

Q: "What is easier to fight, a fire in a modern high-rise or in an old skyscraper?"

A: "The old skyscraper, like the Empire State Building, was better constructed. It had fire towers. It was safer for egress and it was probably better as far as fire-fighting goes".

- New York

Q: "Has there been a lowering of standards or what is the reason?"

A: "Probably for economic reasons the standards have been lowered. Probably pressure was put on by the real estate people to build a cheaper building in really hard-pressed times, in times when economically they wanted to get away from the rigid code of the past. And as a result of that, they did loosen up the cost".

Q: "Would that apply to the World Trade Centre, too?"

A: "Definitely. The World Trade Centre has vertical voids that go up through many floors. Definitely! "



Preparing for the interview with George Kreuzer (centre) of Rescue 1, talking to a representative of New York's fire brigades

George was truly worried about fighting a major fire in the twin towers. We also talked about the vast use of asbestos for the protection of the steel girders, but I did not mention this in my narration, instead concentrating on the problems skyscrapers create. They are great wasters of energy, as I learned from Paul Gapp, the architecture critic of the Chicago Tribune.

"I think the sky-scraper, as we know it today, is a doomed species", Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Gapp said. "The height race is over, the struggle of one company trying to build a sky-scraper that is taller than another one. Giant corporations wanted them taller and taller, simply to manifest their magnificence. But sky-scrapers that rise the height of 80, 90, 100 storeys are inefficient and they waste energy. As the building becomes taller, we have less and less space which can be devoted to the functions of offices. More and more space is caught up with elevators and other mechanical contrivances. So on financial grounds alone the skyscraper is doomed."

- New York

At New York's World Trade Centre I had already noticed that architectural constraints had led to a remarkable departure from competition. There were 22 restaurants, cafeterias and snack bars in the twin towers, serving 25,000 to 30,000 meals a day, but they were all run by the same company, which had only one kitchen. All hamburgers came from the same mincer, all soup from one gigantic pot. There was not enough room at the base of the towers for storage and cooking facilities of competing companies. On higher levels space was too expensive, and it would have been a waste of money to transport kitchen refuse on lifts. "Technology has led to a kind of capitalist collectivisation", I said in the narration, and the film showed examples: A man from Santo Domingo, who peeled 700 pounds of potatoes a day, someone else, who produced 120 pounds of small butter-knobs, and the bakery, which worked in two shifts from 7 in the morning until midnight. 50 to 60 differently decorated birthday cakes were ordered every day.

These sidelights did not serve to "humanise" New York's gigantesque building. I turned to Carolyn Bellamy, then President of the City Parliament of New York, and asked her:

"Are you happy with the World Trade Centre?"

"It is a rather ugly building", she replied.

"Would you today vote for the construction of another office building like the World Trade Centre?"

"It would depend on the density of the buildings in a particular area, on location, on what the amenities were. Merely to provide another large building that is such a cold front to the city would be an unwise vote, as far as I am concerned".

"Hasn't it been one of the arguments that New York should have the highest building in the world?"

"We can take pride in being the greatest city in the world without having the highest buildings in the world", Carolyn Bellamy answered. She would later become known internationally as the Chief Executive Officer of UNICEF.