

Extract from:

A Journey Through Ruins: the Last Days of London

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From Chapter 17, 'Excellence: From Fifth Avenue to Hackney Town Hall'

In 1989, the actor Bob Hoskins visited the Dalston Rio to publicize the London launch of his film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* In the course of this visit to the cinema he used to attend as a boy, Hoskins explained for the benefit of an interested enquirer that 'New York is like Dalston, only bigger'.

A similar proposition had formed in my mind a couple of years previously when I took a walk up Fifth Avenue one Sunday just before Christmas. The street was packed with shoppers and the Salvation Army were well dug in on the corners, tinkling handbells against the noise of blaring car horns and foraying out into the crowd to appeal on behalf of the unfortunates for whom Christmas promised only another freezing night in a doorway. The shop windows were alight with seasonal tableaux. Transworld Airlines had perched a half-hearted crib on top of a mountain of cotton wool. Alitalia had gone folkloric, flying in an ornate tree-bark crèche from rural Italy and displaying it as a piece of authentic Piedmontese culture.

The larger Department Stores had roped off special viewing areas on the street, put their doormen out as ushers and filled their windows with animated dream sequences in which Christmas merged with peak moments in the history of the American spirit.

In one window I saw the founding fathers dressed up as prosperous nineteenth-century gentlemen and greeting each other on the snow-covered steps of a gaslit Carnegie Hall. But the real crowd-puller was set in a nursery interior of the most wishful old-fashioned kind. A model steam train circled a laden Christmas tree and then wound through to the next window where the cuttings and tunnels of a snow-covered landscape awaited it. Around the train model children went through mechanical motions of their own: fixing a broken carriage, working the controls or just following things with an enchanted doe-like eye. Even the family cat twitched its tail appreciatively as the train rattled by. Saks and Co may deal in the latest styles, but the sentimentally contrived clockwork romance in their window greeted every passing shopper as *Citizen Kane*.

Further along Fifth Avenue I came upon a building which is a stranger to such coy discretion. Identified by large bronze letters over its prominent doorway, Trump Tower is an uncompromisingly modern glass edifice that rises in stepped and tree-covered terraces up to the height of the Tiffany building next door and then soars on up for fifty-eight saw-toothed floors.

Huge doors revolve under the watchful eye of doormen whose uniforms – made in London, of course – have been likened to those of South American generals on parade, and then deliver the visitor into an 'atrium' of bursting flamboyance. The place is an explosion of polished brass and brilliant pink marble raised to a high shine on both floor and walls, and I'm confident that Mrs Jan Cooper, of the Holly Street Estate, would have loved it.

Reflective glass fills the area with a speculative sense of space and escalators rise up one side of the atrium, doubling people with their own reflections and moving the whole preoccupied assemblage up and down between five floors of exclusive shops: Asprey, Buccellati, Cartier, Charles Jourdan, Bonwit Teller . . . The atrium converges on an impressive monument to liquidity, throughput and flow: an amber-lit waterfall tumbles down eighty feet of soapy pink marble and then sits bubbling in the bistro where things slow down for a while. Above the atrium rises the tower with its floors

of exclusive office space and its 263 luxurious apartments. Behind it is an enclosed 'public park'. Built under glass and planted with exotic trees and fake Victorian lamp-posts which would not look out of place in the new Bow, this unlikely amenity joins the 'retail Atrium' to the IBM Gallery of Science and Art. As one visiting critic recently managed to stutter before words failed him altogether, Trump Tower is certainly 'an interesting new piece of urbanism'. For myself, I thought of Hackney's tower blocks with their dingy foyers and marvelled too: New York was like Dalston, only better.

How might the seasonal touch be brought to a place like this? A few tons of scarlet poinsettias add to the general blaze, but the slick lines of the atrium could scarcely be expected to tolerate any pokey-looking cribs with their plaster-cast messiahs, unkempt shepherds and stinking straw. As for the window-dressing, this was equally undisturbed by sentimental clutter of the kind that might involve toy trains and simulated childhood romance. Instead, as I discovered the Trump Tower was offering something truly unique- 'an encounter with the man who had already redeveloped Christmas and was now coming forward to stake his claim on Heaven itself.

Just inside those revolving doors, a monstrous neo-Baroque table had been isolated behind burgundy velvet ropes. It stood there motionless, while its legs crawled with buxom gilt figurines. Behind the table sat a blow-dried Donald Trump, looking impassive in pink silk tie and a long dark blue coat. Next to him a woman was selling copies of a book, taking them from a big pile behind her and cranking away with an American Express machine as she went. Three tall and immaculately tonsured black dudes were in attendance: dressed in charcoal suits, they were supervising the queuing crowd and keeping an eye out for assassins. Trump was settled into his chosen version of seasonal routine – leaning forward to ask the name of each approaching supplicant and then falling back to write a dedication in felt-tip scrawl. There was Donald Trump as image on the cover of his just published tome, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*: sixty floors up with Central Park behind him and his name overhead in the largest gold letters that Random House could find. Here was Donald Trump incarnate: selling the word to his disciples while a brassy version of 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' filled the thronging atrium behind him . . .