

Angus Kress Gillespie, *Twin Towers: The Life of New York City's World Trade Center* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1999, \$26). Pp. 280. ISBN 0-8135-2742-2.

Michel de Certeau's selection of the view from the top of the World Trade Center for his parable of urban surveillance – which is then set against the human experience of “walking the streets” (in *The Practice of Everyday Life*) -- is merely the most theoretically inflected criticism of the Twin Towers. Among the blunter objections quoted by Angus Kress Gillespie are: “The buildings are tall – and that's about it” (p. 4); “the clearest sign of the Port Authority's intellectual bankruptcy and arrogant indifference to the real needs of this community” (p. 130); and “this bloated project – these Tobin Towers” (after Austin J. Tobin, executive director of the Port Authority, the sponsors of the World Trade Center) (p. 49). In the face of a pretty bad press, Gillespie conducts a determined defence of the Center, detailing, for example, its origins in the history of the bi-state Port Authority; the sheer complexity of the engineering achievement and the process of construction (the two most fascinating chapters); the constant to-ing and fro-ing over the image of the Twin Towers, including its rejection by architects and leading architectural critics; and, finally, a day in the life of the building. Gillespie's skills are in synthesizing some existing studies (all scrupulously and generously acknowledged), expanding them through the many interviews he conducted and through his careful trawl of newspaper reports, and in crafting the mass of complicated commercial and technical material into a wonderfully clear and often enthralling narrative. Although there is something of Alan Trachtenberg's Brooklyn

Bridge book in *Twin Towers* the key questions to do with art and engineering are deflected into narrative and into the many mini-biographies of the executives and workers which push the study onwards. There is also little of the theoretical acumen and subtlety of argument of Christine Boyer's analysis of the ring of developments around the World Trade Center, including those on landfill resulting from the World Trade Center's excavation (in *The City of Collective Memory*). On the other hand, it is somewhat of a relief to escape, via Gillespie's account of the popular success of the observation deck, from the superior stand-off between optic and haptic spheres which de Certeau seems to have inaugurated in Cultural Studies.

Gillespie has obvious sympathy for the "can-do" mentality of Port Authority chiefs, engineers, and even the independent trucking firm which – probably illegally - got the steel from across the Hudson River to the construction site during a tugboat strike and after a dare-devil failure to transport it by helicopter, the legacy of which is a seven-ton floor panel at the bottom of the Kill van Kull. He deliberately distinguishes his treatment of Austin Tobin from Robert Caro's view of Robert Moses in *The Power Broker*. Most of the heroes of a story which Gillespie is at pains to humanize – in response to the inhuman image which these (more than most) skyscrapers possess – have a military background and there are many intriguing insights into the ways in which the Port Authority brought such people together and then functioned in the often difficult spaces between private and public institutions and ventures. He quotes (but does not interrogate) Emerson's very nineteenth-century pronouncement that "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man ... and all history resolves itself easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons" (p. 155). There is also an attempt to associate the World Trade Center with a

last great expression of post-war American exceptionalism before it hit the buffers of 1960s' environmentalism and protest, the oil crisis, and 1980s' boom and bust economics, not to mention the onset of postmodernism in architecture. Given that architect Minoru Yamasaki was responsible for the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St Louis, it is a sign of trying too hard when Gillespie chooses not to mention this human disaster in his presentation of Yamasaki as an outsider, pursuing his unpopular New Formalism in the face of the architectural establishment. Gillespie's favourite rhetorical sleight-of-hand is the phrase "Of course," by means of which he plays down objections to the aesthetics of the Twin Towers or complaints by local businesses displaced by the World Trade Center or environmental objections to the massive increase in raw sewage pumped into the Hudson during or to private capital's claim that the criteria for occupancy (a link to World Trade) was conveniently side-stepped when the Center had difficulty reaching even occupancy targets, with the result that the Port Authority simply competed for basic office space with the rest of Manhattan's providers. Gillespie has a tough task and tends to slip rather easily between taking the side of the man in the street - against an elite architectural intelligentsia which insisted on disliking the Twin Towers and refused to acknowledge that when *King Kong* was re-made and its concluding battle re-sited or when the Towers became the prime postcard image and entered *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* that the people had taken the Towers to their hearts - and taking the side of hard-nosed commercialism when local businessmen or environmentalists railed against the building. If Gillespie wins his case it is, finally, because the World Trade Center exists and has now done so for getting on for thirty years. As construction manager, Ray Monti put it, when explaining how construction continued even when the

World Trade Center badly exceeded its budget, “Once I’m started, what are you going to do to me? Stop the building in the middle? We’re now rolling” (p. 71).

*University of Nottingham*

DOUGLAS TALLACK