



The man who would be Christ

by Patrick Wright

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About six months ago, I was in New York City for a brief visit and took a walk up Fifth Avenue one Sunday 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. 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.

The real crowdpuller 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 the cuttings and tunnels of a snow-covered landscape in the next window. 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. 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 to a new building which is a stranger to such discretion. Identified by two-foot high bronze letters over its prominent doorway, this is Trump Tower—an uncompromisingly modern glass edifice which rises in stepped and tree-covered terraces up to the height of the Tiffany building next door, and then soars on up for 58 saw-toothed floors.

Trump Tower is unmistakably brazen. Huge revolving doors deliver one, under the watchful eye of doormen whose uniforms have been likened to those of South American generals on parade, 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. 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, through-put and flow—an amber-lit waterfall tumbles down 80 feet of soapy pink marble and then sits bubbling in the bistro.



Just inside those revolving doors the Trump Tower was offering something truly unique: an encounter with the man who has already redeveloped Christmas and was now coming forward to reveal his plans for Heaven itself. A monstrous neo-baroque table had been isolated behind burgundy velvet ropes. It stood there motionless, while its legs crawled with busty gilt figurines. Behind the table sat a blow-dried Trump, looking impassive in a 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. 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 clockwork 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 book: 60 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' poured from the sound system and filled the thronging atrium behind.

It would indeed be a churlish visitor who stepped into Donald Trump's atrium and refused to marvel. In stark contrast with British endeavours like the Trocadero near Piccadilly Circus, Trump Tower demonstrates that a building can be glitzy without also being tacky. Ike Turner should take heart. Cruelly lampooned as the man whose front room proved that it really was possible to spend a million dollars in Woolworths, he can now visit Trump Tower and stand assured that the problem was never just a matter of taste. Quantity can be both piled up and transmuted into quality. Towering and significant structures can be built up entirely from clichés. Hailed and deplored as the building which brought the vulgarity of Las Vegas and Atlantic City to Manhattan, Trump Tower is also dedicated to the televisual opulence of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Indeed, the atrium was quickly adopted as a location for the next generation of soaps. The CBS mini-series, *I'll Take Manhattan*, didn't just take its cameras into the bistro. It took Trump and gave him a part.

Opening their personalised first editions of *Trump: The Art of the Deal* on their way home, Donald Trump's followers will have discovered that the man who has recently been feted as 'America's masterbuilder' is not moved by lust for money alone: 'I've got enough, much more than I'll ever need.' The animating impulse is of a grander and more worthy kind. Where others 'paint beautifully on canvas or write wonderful poetry', Trump likes 'making deals, preferably big deals. That's how I get my kicks.'

As an artist of the deal, Trump takes a distinctive approach to his work. He likes each day to resemble his retail atrium: an unpredicted 'happening', as he once described it, which declares its own unique prospects as it goes along. Not a man to weigh himself down with a brief case, he is equally careful to avoid stifling the creative play of his imagination with 'structure' of a bureaucratic kind. Confident in his own sense of what it is to be a developer, Trump likes 'to come to work each day and just see what develops'.



He styles himself somewhere between a Zen master and Jackson Pollock, who talked famously of the things that happen ‘when I am in my painting’. Like other artists Trump has his chosen medium; the day starts to move at about nine in the morning when ‘I get on the phone’.

His book offers the inside story on Trump Tower. As Trump writes, ‘a guy named Arthur Drexler, from the Museum of Modern Art, put it very well when he said ‘Skyscrapers are machines for making money’. Drexler meant it as a criticism. I saw it as an incentive.’ While architecture critics carped on about aesthetics, Trump knew that he was in the fantasy business. After ‘assembling’ his site and winning every possible planning concession, he focused everything on his chosen market. He set out to create a building with ‘aura’—one that was ‘larger than life’ and would appeal to ‘the wealthy Italian with the beautiful wife and the red Ferrari’.

False economies were out. Whether or not Trump was really targeting the mafia, the idea was to make people feel ‘comfortable, but also pumped up to spend money’. If customers would enjoy the massage of being taken for a ride on solid-bronze escalators, then Trump wasn’t going to scrimp on the million dollars this extra touch cost. If they would be more turned on by two million dollars worth of purling waterfall than by the conventional ‘art’ suggested by various unimaginative advisers, then this, too, would be part of the deal. As for all that soapy pink marble, the name is *Breccia Pernice* and Trump recalls the day when he and his wife first saw a sample of this rare stone - an ‘exquisite blend of rose, peach, and pink that literally took our breath away’. The transports turned out to be mutual. With Trump rejecting 60 per cent of the stone that was cut because of white streaks that were ‘jarring to me’, the top of an Italian mountain had been removed before the floors and walls of the retail atrium were clad to their creator’s satisfaction.

Trump: The Art of the Deal is a high-rise autobiography of the increasingly familiar co-written type. It tells the tale of a man who lives on the 58th floor and is still going up. Donald Trump was born a few million dollars up from the ground floor, but he is at pains to point out that he still started his ascent from a proper home. His father is Fred Trump, a tough developer of low-cost working-class housing who has made his packet in outer New York boroughs like Queens and the Bronx. By the forties when Donald was just an infant, Fred Trump was borrowing millions from the Federal Housing Administration to build high-rise apartment complexes, and then bringing in controversial ‘windfall profits’ by forcing the projects through under budget.

Donald doesn’t dwell on the various scandals that attended his father’s successful exploitation of public funds, preferring to recall the family home as a ‘very traditional’ place. Fred is featured as ‘the power and breadwinner’ while Mary, his Scottish spouse, glows in her son’s memory as ‘the perfect housewife’ who loved her children, darned socks and did charity work. Church was on Fifth Avenue where the Trump family would go to hear the message from Norman Vincent Peale, a minister who was also the best-selling author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. School was a Military Academy in upstate New York. Donald’s favourite among the teachers was ‘a former drill



sergeant in the marines' whose educational method was to 'go for the jugular' whenever he sensed weakness.

Young Donald made his first big deal while still at college. He bought Swifton Village, a housing project in Cincinnati which had run into trouble, at a knock-down price and wasted no time in getting rid of the hillbilly tenants who had drifted in from Kentucky and turned the place into a slum. He then fixed it up 'to attract a better element', adding shutters and colonial style doors before cranking up the rents. The final touch was to sell the whole thing to a well-lunched sucker from an out-of-town investment trust just as the area was nose diving.

Trump was still in his twenties when he decided to bring his artistry to bear on Manhattan itself. While still at business school he had talked ambitiously about changing the Manhattan skyline, and in 1971 he rented a bachelor apartment on Third Avenue and started to 'walk the streets' in search of likely properties. He also finessed his way into exclusive clubs where he would enjoy dating 'the most beautiful women in the world' and worrying paunchy grey-haired husbands with his own lean good looks. From here the story is one of unchecked ascent and it involves what Trump, remembering his old baseball coach, calls 'leverage' as well as the more conventional strengths of tooth and nail. There are the lawsuits, there are the contributions to politicians, there are the first sites picked out among the welfare hotels and drug-infested parks of Manhattan's more blighted areas, and bought at a knock-down price when New York City was slumped.

One deal leads to the next, but as Donald Trump rises up through a growing empire of abandoned railyards, hotels, casinos and apartment buildings overlooking Central Park, his story diversifies beyond its catalogue of accumulations. There are the rewards: the helicopters, yachts and jet planes, the meetings with famous men (from John Cardinal O'Connor to Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan), the fabulous houses and, of course, the superb wife. As a Czech who possesses the physical prowess of an Olympic skier, the looks of a former 'top-model' and the conventional wifely virtues of homeliness and motherhood, Ivana Trump is portrayed as a perfect partner for the man who can take his pick.

At the heart of Trump's story is a drama of struggle. Trump has come into conflict with a variety of forces: architectural preservationists who have resisted his demolition crews, community boards which have fought his planning applications, well-off people who are enjoying rent-controlled or rent-stabilised tenancies in apartment buildings which Trump wants to tear down, journalists who have dared to criticise, bureaucrats who have used public authority to stand in his way. Recalling the outcry that met his plan to bury the old Commodore Hotel under curtain walls of reflective glass, Trump is pleased to point out that in transforming the hotel into the Grand Hyatt he has 'created four walls of mirrors' that, far from failing to fit in, make the surrounding traditional buildings more visible than ever.



The battle of the Bonwit Teller murals is less easily settled. While demolishing the old Bonwit building to make way for Trump Tower, Donald found that it would be unexpectedly expensive to remove the Art Deco friezes that he had agreed to give to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. So, as he writes, 'I ordered my guys to rip them down'. There was considerable public outcry and while Trump insists (with all the confidence of a true artist) that the murals were overrated and that many of his critics were 'phonies and hypocrites', he also confesses to slight feelings of regret.

Worse problems were to come at 100 Central Park South when Trump hired Citadel Management to run the building in a way that would encourage tenants to leave and suggested, with what many recognised as a shocking degree of cynicism, that the apartments that were already vacant might be used to house New York's homeless.

There are other stories that Trump prefers to leave out. There is no mention here of Paul Gapp, architecture critic of the *Chicago Tribune* who described one of Trump's towering schemes as 'architecturally lousy' and was promptly (and unsuccessfully) sued for \$500 million. There is no mention of Eddie and Julius Trump who were sued for using their own name in business ('I would like them to change their name', Donald Trump remarked of this unrelated pair whose 'Trump Group' had been established for 20 years). Neither is there any word of Alvin Gunther, the man who was killed by a shard of glass which fell from the heights of Trump Tower on the day of its opening in 1983.

Trump likes to project himself as a champion of the underdog pitched against an all-powerful establishment - whether he is hiring as many women as possible into top positions in his organisation or taking on his own tenants. In 1986, he adopted the case of Mrs Annabel Hill, an 'adorable little lady from Georgia' who was about to lose her farm through mortgage foreclosure. Mrs Hill's 67-year-old husband had already committed suicide in the vain hope that insurance money would settle the debt. She was still \$100,000 short when Trump launched the appeal that would finally set her free. On 23 December 1986 there had been another innovative Christmas performance in the retail atrium of Trump Tower: a mortgage burning ceremony in which Trump held the paper while a grateful Mrs Annabel Hill applied the flame.

Trump's most successful engagement with the establishment has been his dog-fight with Ed Koch, the mayor of New York. Trump harps on a popular chord when he denounces Koch as a bully, moron and coward whose administration is both 'pervasively corrupt and totally incompetent'. Trump 'beat the hell' out of Koch in getting a tax-abatement to build his Tower, and he then found the perfect opportunity to prove his charge of incompetence. In June 1980 the City authorities closed the Wollman Skating Rink in Central Park, intending to rebuild it over two years. Six years of bungling and 12 million squandered dollars later, New York City officials announced their decision to start the rebuilding all over again. It was then that Trump made his move, offering to finance and build a brand new ice-rink on the Wollman site in six months, on the condition that he could lease the rink from the city at a 'fair market rental'. Trump finished the job and the Wollman story became one of the national events of the year. Trump offers it as a



modern parable: 'It was a simple, accessible drama about the contrast between governmental incompetence and the power of effective private enterprise.'

By this time Trump has brought his gasping readers up those 58 floors. They've rubbed shoulders with Trump Tower's exclusive residents: the wealthy French people who came here to sit out the Mitterrand years; the Asians and Arabs who couldn't get through the discriminatory vetting procedures of the cooperatives that control so many of New York's most exclusive apartment buildings; stars like Steven Spielberg, Johnny Carson, Paul Anka and the now deceased Liberace. Having raised his readers up this high, Donald Trump offers them the ultimate Christmas tableau: a fleeting glimpse into the enchanted world of America's loudest billionaire.

The Trumps' New York home is a million dollar triplex at the very top of the Tower. Visiting the Saudi billionaire Adnan Khashoggi in Olympic Tower one day in 1985, Trump found himself in 'the biggest living room I'd ever seen' and decided that he'd quite like one of his own. 'What the hell,' he thought to himself, 'Why shouldn't I have exactly the apartment I wanted— particularly when I built the whole building?' So Trump stands there and gestures toward the 27 solid marble columns which Italy's finest craftsmen carved for his 80 foot living room, announcing that 'they arrived yesterday, and they're beautiful'. Lest anyone should have missed the point, he rubs it in: 'What I'm doing is about as close as you're going to get, in the twentieth century, to the quality of Versailles.'

As we take our privileged glimpse into this celestial place, a curious kind of morality play rolls into action. The first scenes are of unchecked extravagance, hedonism and luxury, but it is not long before an alarming giddiness sets in. The pleasures of megalomania should not be underestimated, but it can still be hard to live so far beyond the limits of the normal human condition: everything about oneself—every utterance, every passing thought, every memory—starts to burn with intense significance and before long gravity itself gives way. Even such a distinguished artist of the deal as Donald Trump is susceptible to vertigo so, like Harold with his Purple Crayon in that much-loved American children's story from the fifties, he no sooner finds himself in thin air than he quickly sketches in some firm ground under his feet.

If Trump was in the White House, which, as he hints, he may well be before too long, he might follow the example of President Reagan and look for astrological anchorage in the stars. But his Christmas tableau is actually more like an old-fashioned western than a story of special people with occult powers. Trump styles himself and his friends as real men who have carved their initials into the world's most famous skyline. Their Manhattan penthouses become tents on the high plains of America's last frontier. They sit at the fireside, remembering Mother and distinguishing themselves from the lesser types who continually get in their way. As real men of action, these fellows of the deal know that you've 'got to take a stand or people will walk all over you'. They have as little regard for 'suckers' as they do for 'employees'. In their book, an 'employee' is either a woman or a eunuch who 'thinks small'.



Trump's true companions of the deal defend simple 'gut-feeling' in a world full of spurious specialisation and bureaucratic procedure. As men of unlimited wealth and power, they continue to think of themselves as underdogs oppressed by an unaccountable establishment. They see con-men and bullshit everywhere. Between themselves, however, there is a code of honour. Like true *mafiosi*, they know that 'you can trust family in a way that you can never trust anyone else'. They also know that sometimes it is more important to 'pay your respects' than to make money, so they will pass up a promising deal to get to the funeral of a much respected 'patriarch'.

The companions of the deal may not understand all the technicalities, but they know that a handshake is the sign of a man's word, and have nothing but contempt for the 'low-lifes, the horror-shows' for whom only the signed contract counts.

This is how Trump finally styles himself: a man who has broken all the limits but who has also reinvented morality. He has everything the world can offer but, as he likes to point out, he has never touched a drop of alcohol or smoked a cigarette in his life. A man who got married in the church of his childhood and who has gone on to stand tall as a true patriarch in his own family, Trump is also a man of charity who has done his bit for the Vietnam Veterans and other worthy causes. Indeed, he is even moral in his egotism. Some people may jeer as he tries to write his name in large bronze letters over the world but, as he has replied, at least he has a reputation to uphold—unlike the sharks who hide their real identity under anonymous company titles.

Is this morality just another simulation, like the clockwork display just down the road in Saks and Co's window? It's hard for an outsider to say with any certainty. There can be little doubt, however, that morality, like money, is something the rich need far more of than the rest of us.

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