



# The Complex Symbolism of the Twin Towers

Robert Sandler, Stuyvesant High School, New York, NY

Grade level: 9 - 12

Number of class periods: 1 - 2

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## Objective

Through this lesson, students will understand the history behind the construction of the Twin Towers, the city's evolving relationship with the buildings and their importance as symbols. Students will also start to see the city's buildings as a historical text through which they can understand the city's history.

## Common Core Standards

*Comprehensive Common Core Alignments at end of lesson plan.*

- Reading Standards for Literacy in History/ Social Studies 1, 2, 9
- Writing Standards for Literacy in History/ Social Studies 9
- Speaking and Listening Standards 1

## Resources

- [Illustrated History of New York City, Ric Burns](#)
- [The World Trade Center as a Symbol \(PowerPoint presentation\)](#)
- [Ground Zero Supertower, NOVA \(Extra Credit\)](#)
- ["Why Symbols Become Targets," National Geographic](#)
- ["The towering symbol of Sept. 11: What the journey of what was once called the 'Freedom Tower' says about New York City," Daily News](#)

## Activity

### History of the World Trade Center Presentation

Use Ric Burns *Illustrated History of New York City* to give the class a brief lecture on the history behind the Twin Towers. Explain how during the post WWII era, most of the businesses were abandoning the downtown financial district and moving to midtown. Show **slides #2-3** of the Seagram's Building and the XYZ buildings near Rockefeller Center as examples of the new International Style and the relocation of corporations uptown.

Then show **image #4** of Nelson and David Rockefeller and explain how they were the power brokers behind the financing and construction of the World Trade Center. Discuss their vision that this new complex would act as a catalyst for the revival of the entire downtown business district.

After looking at **images #5-9**, have a student read **slide #7** aloud in which Minoru Yamasaki, the architect describes his vision that the towers were supposed to be a symbol of world peace.

Focus on slide **# 8**.

- Why did critics dislike the towers? In other words, why didn't the WTC enjoy the same love as the Chrysler or Empire State Building?

Show the students **images #9-12** and explain how these events helped the Twin Towers win over New Yorkers. The observation deck was opened and became a huge attraction, then Philippe Petit's tight wire act in 1974 captured the city's imagination, and in 1976 Hollywood did a remake of King Kong, which included the beast



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climbing the towers. That same year the Bicentennial celebration took place with the towers as the backdrop. Through these events the Twin Towers became the iconic symbol of the city.

Have students look back at **image #6** of the Twin Towers and ask them from their perspective,

- Before the events of 9/11, what did these towers symbolize?

Have them write down their answers and then share them with their class mate. Some possible responses are --- Global Trade, Capitalism, American optimism and confidence, freedom, technology, the American Empire.

Ask them how they think Osama bin Laden viewed the Twin Towers.

- How could Bin Laden and Yamasaki have such radically different viewpoints?
- Why did Bin Laden choose the Twin Towers and the Pentagon as the two major targets?

### Why Was the World Trade Center a Target?

Have the class read *National Geographic* article "Why Symbols Become Targets" aloud. Have a different students alternate every paragraph.

In the article, Christopher Simpson, professor of communications at American University says,

*The creation of symbols seems to be hard-wired into human brains and human personalities," ...People build symbols to try and express themselves, and these expressions reflect their culture.*

Ask the class to evaluate this statement.

- What is it about the physical features of Twin Towers that appeals to the author?

The students should focus on this section:

*The sophisticated structure of the slender, crystalline twin towers made them especially inviting symbols of America's achievement—glass and steel pillars reaching into the clouds, their ethereal surfaces reflecting the changing moods of New York City.... The World Trade Center represented the elite and the powerful; its tenants were household names. It was the financial hub of the country, and even, some would argue, the world.*

Discussion question for the class:

- What are some important symbolic landmarks in other parts of the world?

### Rebuilding and Symbolism

Have the class read *Daily News* piece, "The towering symbol of Sept. 11: What the journey of what was once called the 'Freedom Tower' says about New York City"

- Ask the class their opinion on the debate over the naming of the tallest skyscraper in the Western hemisphere.

In the quote below, former governor Pataki expresses his opinion and mentions the fact that the building is 1,176 ft. Within hours of the announcement, Fox News accused the Port Authority of being anti-American, and former Gov. George Pataki called the change "troubling."

It shouldn't just be, you know, 1 World Trade Center," Pataki told me. "It should have a name. And symbolizing 1776 and showing the world that we weren't going to be frightened in the face of these attacks . . . it all logically came together that the perfect name for this is the Freedom Tower.



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Ask the class to look at **image #13 & 14** of One World Trade Center and ask:

- What does this new building symbolize?
- Do they think there should have been two soaring towers rather than just one?
- What do they think of the argument that this area is hallowed ground like Gettysburg and we should never have built new commercial towers and a museum on this spot?

### Extra Credit

Students could watch Nova's *Ground Zero Super Tower*. Ask them to type a one page paper explaining what engineering and architectural innovations went into building this structure.

### Optional Activity

Students could also do the same project with other iconic NYC landmarks like Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, Grand Central, the Chrysler Building, Times Square and Lincoln Center. In each case, they can research how the structure reveals the cultures' values and history of that society. Students should create poster boards or power points that explain their research in an engaging way.

### Assessment/Reflection

The goal of this activity is that students will start to see the built environment, New York's most iconic buildings as a way to understand the city's layered history, or as J.B. Jackson, the great historian said, "Landscape is history made visible". First, show students the United Nations Complex, specifically the Secretariat and the General Assembly (images #13-15 in Power Point) and then have them research the architectural and political history and the symbolism of these buildings.

Afterwards, have them compare and contrast their findings with the motivations behind the construction of the World Trade Center. Students should come to the conclusion that after WWII, New York saw itself as the political and cultural capital of the world and placing the UN headquarters in Turtle Bay on the East River would project this new optimistic spirit and international vision. It was the beginning of the American Century, America was the preeminent military and economic global power and the city's leaders, like the Rockefeller family wanted the UN with its sleek, minimalist aesthetic built in New York as a way to convey their new confidence.

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### Common Core Alignments

*These Alignments were written for 9-10<sup>th</sup> grade but this lesson can be adjusted for use with other groups. It aligns with the following standards:*

#### Reading Standards for Literacy in History/ Social Studies

##### Key Ideas and Details

Standard 1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

- Students will be using the texts and will need to cite specific evidence to support their analysis to explain both why the world trade center was originally built and how it impacted the culture and economy of New York City. Students will be using various photographs as text to help them understand the historical landscape of New York City and will use the articles to gain a more concrete understanding of the symbolism of the World Trade Center and why it became a target.



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Standard 2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

- Students will be looking at various photographs of New York City and the downtown/midtown area and will be exploring how the symbolism of buildings and architecture developed throughout history. Students will also be tracing the theme of symbolism throughout the two assigned texts.

### **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

Standard 9: Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

- Students will be looking at visual aids, photographs, and two articles and will be comparing and contrasting the symbolic legacy of buildings in New York City. Students will compare and contrast the World Trade Center with the United Nations or another iconic building but will also be comparing the treatment of the topic of symbolic architecture within the two articles they read.

### **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/ Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects**

#### **Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

Standard 9: Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

- Students will be using several different forms of informational texts including articles and photographs to analyze and reflect the symbolic nature of the World Trade Center both for New York City as well as for the United States as a whole.

### **Speaking and Listening Standards 6-12**

#### **Comprehension and Collaboration**

Standard 1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade appropriate, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

- Students will be discussing the impact of symbolism, the decision to place the World Trade Center in downtown, and the implications of the "Freedom Tower/One World Trade Center" for the future of New York City and the United States.