The City of the American Dream:  
A Bret Easton Ellis / Steven Millhauser Remix

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This essay is a part of a project that examines what might be called “New York City literature,” a good deal of which is based on the “rag-to-riches” paradigm—the American Dream—initially fostered by the novel of Horatio Alger. It focuses on two contemporary novels, Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (1991) and Steven Millhauser’s Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer (1996), that foreground the conceptual significance of material urban space in New York City in this genre. Although the setting of the first novel is the 80s while the other is historical, both novels use the American Dream as their common theme and make use of the architecture of the city as a central component of the narrative. On the one hand, Ellis applies the conventions of rags-to-riches novels to contemporary New York society to convey the vacuous nature of urban spaces, with their ridiculously intense speed and density, thereby stressing the continuity between genres. On the other hand, Millhauser’s New York novel revisits the rags-to-riches story, directly addressing the issue of urban space by using “impossible architecture” as the central theme, and succeeds in foregrounding the presence of a self-generating environment, in which the physical architecture of the city is intrinsically connected to the protagonist’s desire.

To point out the crucial role the emerging urban landscape of New York City plays in the American Dream, I will begin by discussing the general idea of “rags-to-riches,” an archetype best represented by Horatio Alger’s juvenile fiction, whose formula gave rise to the term. Each Alger story revolves around a poor but honest hero who evolves with the help of an older, socially established male character. The hero is falsely accused of a crime he has not committed but is later exonerated and advances in the world. Alger heroes have certain common features: First, they exercise the power of will. Second, they evolve by changing professions and social status, and finally, and most importantly to this discussion, their social positions are physically represented in the city’s geography.

Ragged Dick, published in 1868 is the Alger archetype, an immediate best-seller which stands as the best of its kind. It tells the story of “Ragged” Dick, a smart and
aspiring homeless bootblack. With some haphazard help from wealthy male strangers, he begins disciplining and educating himself. Finally, he becomes a clerk in a counting house, and changes his name to Richard Hunter, Esquire. This novel foregrounds the central role of the cityscape in this genre. In Chapter Six, Dick offers Frank, the rich country boy, a whirlwind tour of the city. This chapter, titled “Up Broadway to Madison Square,” contains so vivid a description of New York that the novel served as a sort of tour guide. It explains the grid system of the city, shows famous edifices such as Barnum Museum and Trinity Church, and tours Central Park, which was then under construction. All these details educate the reader about the economic landscape of the city:

Third Avenue is a broad street, but in the character of its houses and stores it is quite inferior to Broadway, though better than some of the avenues further east. Fifth Avenue, as most of my readers already know, is the finest street in the city, being lined with splendid private residences, occupied by the wealthiest classes. (Alger 43)

As Dick ascends the social ladder, he moves from his “box-hotel” in Five Points to a dingy tenement apartment on Mott Street; the end of the novel sees him moving out because now he “can afford to leave” and “live in a nicer quarter of the city” (132). This implies that his joke that he polishes shoes to save money for his “mansion up on Fifth Avenue” will be realized in the future (4).

New York City, according to Alger’s rags-to-riches ethics, is divided between the poor and the wealthy, and the fantasy the Alger novels provide is the possibility of social climbing in the form of a physical movement to a richer quarter of the city. Thus, the city—its actual geography and architecture—came to be represented as inseparable from the social and economical stratification it embraces. Such a pattern became fixed in the American imagination, in particular, in American realist novels. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1904) both can be best understood in relation to the trope of the American Dream myth, since each uses Broadway and Fifth Avenue to demonstrate the social ascent or descent of their characters: *Sister Carrie* can be summarized as a story of a rural girl moving along Fifth Avenue up to stardom as an actress on Broadway, while *The House of Mirth* is a story of a high society girl who moves “down” to Sixth Avenue. The city represented
in these novels played an important role in creating the popular image of New York from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Just as New York City—especially its skyscrapers—became one of the main subjects of modernistic visual arts, it was also the main subject of literary works. John Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) tries to capture all the components of the urban space to stress its presence as a complex machine that overwhomls the individual; and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novels and stories, in particular “May-Day” (1920) and “My Lost City” (1932) incorporate the space created by skyscrapers using the tradition of urban landscape in the rags-to-riches stories. Thus the city, represented as a socially and economically stratified arena in which the characters’ social rise and fall take place, becomes more than a physical receptacle or backdrop—it is an active agent in the novel. This pattern remains unchanged, as we will see in the following discussion of *American Psycho* and *Martin Dressler: The Tale of American Dreamer*.


*American Psycho* chronicles a wealthy investment banker’s hollow and psychopathic double life. This novel has been the subject of controversy for its notoriously gruesome description of extreme violence and the obnoxious emptiness of the yuppie culture it portrays in detail, but, beneath its surface, it is a rather traditional rendering of the American Dream. Often discussed in relation to the nineteenth century realistic novel, its debt to the genre is prominent; *American Psycho* superposes the urban geography of the American Dream represented in the turn of the century realistic novels onto New York City in the 1980s, and, through the subjective experience of the American hero in the city, questions if the concept could still be valid. Ellis’ novel is, so to speak, a riches-to-riches story that chronicles the already affluent protagonist’s quest for exclusive space in a city where urban space coincides with people’s identities, and his struggle to change his already affluent and established, and thus unchangeable, world. Following the genre’s convention, New York’s architectural space forms an important component in this process, the city being described as a congested space constantly accelerating its density and its speed. By pushing the exaggeration to the maximum, Ellis shows us how the protagonist, who seemed to be in control of his environment, is overwhelmed by what surrounds him.

The opening scene succinctly conveys the sense of urban space, from its stagnation
to its detachedness. It shows the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, and his co-worker (both are “with Pierce & Pierce and twenty-six”) in a cab stuck in a gridlock (3), heading uptown to a friend’s party. Although Bateman’s movement seems free and fast, in fact he scarcely walks, instead constantly shuffling back and forth between the same sorts of places. His city consists of Wall Street, Upper West Side, and several other trendy spots in the city, but these locations feel somehow homogeneous because they are frequented by the same sorts of people. As if to underline that point, his cab rides do not convey any sense of speed. Rather, they signify “gridlock”: stuck, idle time.

This cab ride scene also sets up another important motif in this novel: the city as spectacle and Bateman’s sense of detachment from it. Bateman is not a participant in the city; he merely maintains his privileges to enjoy others as they appear to him. There are continuous references to Les Misérables and Bateman’s addiction to “The Patty Winters Show,” symbolically connecting to that sense of detachment that allows Bateman to enjoy somebody else’s hardship as entertainment. Safely enclosed in this small space, Bateman and his friend play the game of count-the-beggars, recognizing dwellers on the street only as objects to be ridiculed and despised, embodiments of the articles on crime and disease that appear in the daily newspaper:

[...] baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis ... and the joke is, the punch line is, it’s all in the city—nowhere else, just here, it sucks, whoa wait, more Nazis, gridlock, gridlock, baby-sellers, black-market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses—

(4)

As this ironically Whitmanesque dark list of city dwellers suggests, American Psycho contains exaggerated representations of people as signs. Not only are people on the street reduced to categorical types, the wealthy bankers are born into money and live in a circle in which everybody is rich, good-looking, and has a great body, which can only be distinguished by slight differences (23). Throughout the novel, this sense is cleverly conveyed through humorous details, such as three couples wearing the same outfits but of different brands, or people constantly confusing one another as if they
were interchangeable. Thus the novel sets up the basic contrast between those to be distinguished through minute details and those conceived of just as a mass of flesh. People in the city, to Bateman, are differentiated as either Harvard or Yale, Pierce & Pierce or JPMorgan, business school in Lausanne or Geneva, or as “bums” or “hardbodies”: nameless, faceless bodies.

In the same sense, spaces that appear in *American Psycho* are connected to people’s social status in an extreme way. Place signifies wealth and status, thus throughout the novel Bateman continuously tries to steal other people’s places, such as Paul’s apartment, Tim’s house on the Hamptons, a business partner’s limousine, and other couples’ reservations at restaurants, because space is the direct representation of status. The locations Bateman frequents, such as restaurants, gyms, nightclubs, and university clubs, are all bachelor’s places, homosocial and homophobic spaces that embody the class division. “Homelessness,” which literally means being without a place in the city, is suggested as the exact opposite idea to what Bateman’s exclusive places convey, thus fortifying the divide.

While these places are stereotypically exaggerated to serve as a parody of the culture’s vacuous nature, space itself is represented as a judgmental force which defines the social status of its participant: people no longer define the exclusiveness of places to occupy, the place itself does. In particular, social status is represented by having a table reserved at a trendy restaurant, and subsequently, as is evident in the phrase “restaurant whores,” access to a place means more than the person who takes you there (74). This idea finally culminates in the “Dorsia,” the exclusive restaurant Bateman desperately tries to enter throughout the novel. The novel builds up tension around this space; with each refusal, his obsession to get into the restaurant heightens, so that it becomes more than a restaurant, a living entity that selects people to participate, and then refuses those unqualified, like Bateman. His homicidal urge grows when he finds out that his brother Sean has the best seat in the restaurant, and then finally becomes uncontrollable when he discovers that Bethany, his ex-girlfriend, is dating the chef of Dorsia—he murders Bethany as if to take revenge on the place.

Even though he does not have to, Bateman acts as if in accordance with a rags-to-riches hero’s continuous quest for his place in the city: He wants to “fit in,” thus to continue to work and succeed, even though his family owns the company where he works. In the novel, we see Bateman compensate for this immobility by thrusting himself into an obsessive interest about his body; his endless grooming and name-
dropping are caused by his anxiety to see if his appearance fits his class. By using Bateman as a sartorial consultant on how to look “appropriate” in society, Ellis imitates Edith Wharton’s description of high society, thus conveying the continuity between genres. This scene resonates with, for example, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), where Wharton used Ellen Olenska’s exotic dress to signify her out-of-placeness. Yet, the list *American Psycho* gives is far more specific, almost ridiculously so. Indeed, the chapter titled “Morning” is dedicated solely to describing all the minute details of Bateman’s grooming:

Then I inspect my hands and use a nailbrush. I take the ice-pack mask off and use a deep-pore cleanser lotion, then an herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for ten minutes while I check my toenails. Then I use the Probright tooth polisher and next the Interplak tooth polisher (this in addition to the toothbrush) which has a speed of 4200 rpm and reverses direction forty-six times per second; the larger tufts clean between teeth and massage the gums while the short ones scrub the tooth surfaces. I rinse again, with Cēpacol. I wash the facial massage off with a spearmint face scrub. (26)

This goes on for the entire chapter, describing the minutiae of his morning routine, but the mechanical process is told in a monotonous and disinterested way as if it were a users’ manual. The list becomes so big, so specific, that in the end it fails to mean anything about Bateman. Also, it is important that these descriptions are delivered as Bateman’s soliloquy, thus devoid of any sort of communication with others. Details overwhelm the very subject that they are supposed to be describing:

[...] warrants, stock offerings, ESOPs, LBOs, IPOs, finances, refinances, debentures, converts, proxy statements, 8-Ks, 10-Qs, zero coupons, PiKs, GNP$s, the IMF, hot executive gadgets, billionaires, Kenkichi Nakajima, infinity, Infinity, how fast a luxury car should go, bailouts, junk bonds, whether to cancel my subscription to *The Economist*, [...]. (342)

The list, which makes sense only to Bateman, reveals the subject behind the stellar, no-friction smooth surface, overwhelmed and belittled by all these details. By echoing the previous list, his obsessive attempt to remain the same, young, beautiful self is shown
from both inside and outside.

This leads to another aspect of Bateman’s obsession with the body: murder. The contrast between a sign-laden body—a Harvard educated investment banker in an Armani suit whose family owns half Wall Street—and mere flesh—“homeless bums” and “nameless whores”—surfaces as a major theme. The first killing happens in the middle of the novel. From then on the murder escalates, happening more and more frequently as the urge grows out of control. Yet, in the same sense that the brand names Bateman applies to his body start losing their meaning, this novel’s notorious killings, with all their exaggerated gore, happen so casually and so often that they cease to have factual weight. However vivid and detailed the killing scenes are, they are presented so that readers cannot tell if the atrocities really happened or not. Bateman is strangely safe from any prosecution regardless of the abundant evidence he leaves behind, which leads readers to realize that this may all be the first-person narrative of an apparently confused mind.

Thus, these two central events in the novel—both the abundant details and the escalating murders—are about an accelerating urge to refashion and possess, how things increase in amount and speed, ultimately going out of control. Bateman’s fear of physical deformity, potentially caused by HIV/AIDS and aging, breaks out. The body uncovered by signs, so despised and estranged by Bateman, comes back to invade his space. When Luis Carruthers, one of Bateman’s colleagues, seduces Bateman, the tables have been turned. As the latent homoeroticism in his bachelorship becomes apparent, Bateman feels as if his space is contaminated, and actually starts keeping pieces of corpses in his house, offices, and gym lockers. It turns factual rooms into non-real spaces where sign and flesh become inseparable. In other words, the bodies, originally there for Bateman to observe and enjoy, come to invade his space and change it.

The novel’s reprise of the group of friends gathered at “Harry’s” is deliberately placed to stress this point: once a homosocial place, the restaurant is now gaining a totally different signification and outlook. Much as the whole novel started off with a sense of entrapment, the final answer being suggested to Bateman is that there is no exit to this prestigious bar: he can neither escape from his American Dream turned nightmare nor from the city that embodies it (399). He is trapped in the city where intense materiality, speed, and fantasy, the forces that once created, shaped, and saturated it, are now starting to overwhelm it.
In summary, beyond its superficial gruesomeness, *American Psycho* can be read as a traditional story of the American Dream, one that explores the possible places one can go when one is already at the top of the world. *American Psycho* takes the architectural structure of New York, incorporates it in a rags-to-riches narrative, remixes it, and then through exaggeration, shows that the American self is really about power and the urge to refashion one’s self. In the process, the city overwhelms and entraps the individual, thereby foregrounding the power and movement that are a major part of the New York novel.


Another 1990s novel that addresses the trope of the American Dream in relation to the architecture of New York City is Steven Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*. In this story of a shopkeeper’s son who seeks to realize his wild dreams, Millhauser attempts to rewrite the turn-of-the-century rags-to-riches story, in the process exploring the thin line between fantasy and historical accuracy. Whereas Ellis’s novel applies the form to contemporary New York, Millhauser attempts to revisit the subject itself with the focus shifted to the city, in order to recreate the peculiar atmosphere of the growing metropolis.

In his re-reading of the story of the American Dream, Millhauser emphasizes, not those changes that take place within the protagonist, but rather changes of environment within the context of the growing city. Prior studies have tended to focus on the architecture in this novel, the majority of which are symbolic readings. An important aspect missing in these discussions, however, is the fact that buildings in this novel are represented as products of the change in the larger environment—the city—that incorporates, along with material entities, non-material qualities such as speed, variety, and fantasy as inseparable parts. This novel goes further to highlight the centrality of idea and desire in the metropolis, suggesting that these non-material drives are an essential to the material environment.

The novel’s opening is a clear parody of a typical rags-to-riches story. The time is set toward the end of the nineteenth century, in which a citizen from modest beginnings could, it was believed, attain a dreamlike good fortune. This opening includes the image of a socially and economically stratified New York City, suggesting a world in which the character’s social ascent is represented through his movement in the
city. However, Martin, the ambitious son of a cigar storeowner, does not perfectly follow the established path of a rags-to-riches hero. The way Martin climbs the ladder of success—from a hotel cigar store clerk, to a bellhop, to a receptionist, then to a secretary for the manager, all through the help of older men—may be loyal to the convention, but his path is not a simple one. Millhauser creates a strange rhythm in the narrative by having Martin hesitate to put “a foot in the door,” so that he refuses every offer of promotion he is given at least once, violating the most important rule of the genre—taking opportunities as soon as they come (19). Martin’s recurring response to an offered promotion, that he would “think it over,” irritates his boss, Mr. Henning—“Think it over, by God. Sure sir very good sir I’ll think it over a bit sir thank you sir will that be all sir. By God, boy, you don’t think over a thing like this. You seize it by the scruff of the neck and hold onto it and pray it don’t get away” (35-6). His confusion is legitimate because Martin’s out-of-place hesitation creates an awkward pause in the narrative, which in turn draws attention to the essential drive behind the traditional rags-to-riches story: that you have to constantly move upward, geographically and socially, in the big city.

Martin begins the story as a boy who is calm, wise and old for his years, which sets him apart from ordinary rags-to-riches heroes in the sense that he is not eager to refashion himself according to the place he occupies in the city. Neither does the city in which Martin “rises” follow the simple construction of the Avenues, in which success or failure can be measured in a linear uptown/downtown movement. Rather, Martin Dressler presents an eclectic metropolis composed of the various ways in which novels of previous generations represented the city. This composite consists of multitudes of contrasts. For instance, “Kleindeutschland,” the small neighborhood Martin grows up in, is set against the larger, more general city he ventures into. Flashy, trendy Fifth Avenue is contrasted to a meaner, more common Sixth Avenue. The developed downtown area is paired with a wooded, undeveloped uptown still left in wilderness.

Even though, as a rule, the linear structure of the city requires the rags-to-riches hero to leave one place and move on to another, Martin does not comply with that convention either. Even when he becomes successful, he does not leave smaller places behind. Rather, he expands the number of places he can frequent. In other words, he does not renew his geography, but expands it by keeping all the places he has been combined within himself. Millhauser portrays the city as a place ruled by such energy. Martin repeatedly indulges in observing movements in the city, such as elevator rides,
construction sites, and bicycle rides. Instead of being driven towards the top of the
city—i.e. creating movement—he loves to observe the way in which it is constituted
by its unending and frenetic activity. Martin’s childhood memory at Brighton Beach,
written in Whitmanesque run-on sentences, symbolizes his world:

Here at the end of the line, here at the world’s end, the world didn’t end: iron
piers stretched out over the ocean, iron towers pierced the sky, somewhere
under the water a great telegraph cable longer than the longest train stretched
past sunken ships and octopuses all the way to England—and Martin had the
odd sensation, as he stood quietly in the lifting and falling waves, that the
world, immense and extravagant, was rushing away in every direction: behind
him the fields were rolling into Brooklyn and Brooklyn was rushing into
the river, before him the waves repeated themselves all the way to the hazy
shimmer of the horizon, in the river between the two cities the bridge piers
went down through the water to the river bottom and down through the river
bottom halfway to China, while up in the sky the steam-driven elevators rose
higher and higher until they became invisible in the hot blue summer haze.
(16-7, emphasis added)

This image of the world as a multiplicity of movements expanding in every direction
is also connected strongly to that part of Martin’s character that makes him a legitimate
rags-to-riches hero: his strong desire to see things change, which takes form in his
ambition to construct the hotel of his dreams. However, as his business partner
Emmeline suggests, Martin’s ideal hotel does not signify his wealth or success:

One day as they were discussing the expansion of the business to Brooklyn
she said to him, “But what do you want, Martin? What is it you actually
want?”

“Oh, everything,” he said, lightly but without a smile.

“But I don’t think you do, not in the usual way. In a way you don’t want
anything. You don’t care if you’re rich. Suppose you were rich, really rich.
What would you do then?”

“Oh, then,” Martin said. He thought of himself as a child standing in
the waves at West Brighton, feeling the world rushing away in every
direction. (132)

Note that in this crucial moment, the image of waves on West Brighton Beach is repeated. It appears again when Martin imagines a new metropolis growing beneath New York as “a vast and glistening undercity, with avenues and department stores and railroad tracks stretching away in every direction” (259). Martin is portrayed as someone whose desire for the city is different than simply moving up through it to the height of wealth. He wants something “grander, higher, more difficult, more dangerous, more daring,” thus something that is totally apart from the Vanderlyn Hotel (129). His desire for different sorts of buildings is ultimately the desire for a different sort of urban space.

Since the force that drives the city is movement, buildings and spaces in the novel do not function as signifiers of wealth and status. The series of buildings established along Martin’s path—a cigar stand, first one and then several diners, and then, finally the hotels of his dreams—are not represented as tokens of Martin’s wealth or social status. Rather, they underscore Martin’s desire, the generating force in bringing these places into reality, and the accelerated process of building them. In this sense, it is significant that Martin’s first enterprise is a diner, a place simply to eat and thus drastically different from bars, saloons, or high-class restaurants, where people mingle or lounge to show off their status, a stage for social confirmation. Considered in this context, the repartee between Martin and Dundee, his co-owner, illustrates the essence of the city in Millhauser’s novel:

“I want more than that,” Martin said, “I want to keep ’em in. I want people to return. I want them to be unhappy when they’re not here.”

“That’s a tall order,” said Dundee.

“It’s a tall city,” Martin said quickly. (66)

The rags-to-riches cliché that connects the individual’s social rise to the city’s architecture, used first to suggest Martin’s ascent, is now converted to suggest the place where the material city and ideas about the city converge.

Millhauser is known for his keen eye for the minute and the fantastic, a faculty he utilizes in Martin Dressler to recreate an in-depth subjective experience of the city. Hotels, the central subject of the novel, generate those specific things that crowd and
furnish urban space. Hotels are at once the source of an unusual particularity, and at the same time, the provider of random juxtaposition, in which weird details culminate to create a spectacle of haphazard connection:

Martin, who enjoyed the drama of sliding along the row and wondering what fate had in store for him, was astonished by the immense variety of things people carried: leather Gladstone bags with nickel corner protectors, slim leather dress-suit cases, soft alligator-skin satchels, pebble-leather club bags, English cabinet bags, canvas telescope bags with leather straps, hatboxes, black umbrellas with hook handles, colored silk umbrellas with pearl handles, white silk parasols with ruffles, packages tied with string; and one morning a woman wearing a hat with fruit on it came in with a brass cage containing a monkey. (21)

As details become more numerous and more idiosyncratic, their randomness ceases to signify any particular whole; instead they demonstrate the generative force behind them, rendering the protagonist powerless in front of this flux of things that occupies and furnishes the interior.

The sense of being overwhelmed—it is as if space is taking over the role of people who inhabit it—is exemplified by room 411 in the Vanderlyn Hotel, the room occupied by the sickly and sensual Mrs. Hamilton. The simple hotel room is transformed into a feverish and seductive arena as Mrs. Hamilton’s tangible desire crowds the space. The novel depicts those quarters as if they were furnished with Mrs. Hamilton’s complaints, mumblings, and demands, thereby recreating “the terrible stuffy warmth of her wretched room” (27). The lady’s temptation mingles so much with this sensual space that Martin seemingly loses his virginity to it as much as to her. This is a significant incident because the room subsequently returns to its normal state, while the fever and dream that once furnished it are transferred to the now sickly Martin.

As we have seen in previous sections, New York in Martin Dressler is represented as inseparable from the desire surrounding it. While the city grows outward with the desire to expand, rooms grow inward with the desire to densify. The metropolis is a dialectic between the growing city and a small particular space; in both spaces, the material structure is intertwined with non-material qualities. This idea is given full expression in Martin’s two hotels, “The New Dressler” and “The Grand Cosmo” not
only insofar as they are material realizations of Martin’s desire but also in the sense that Martin conceives them as the synthesis of those things that have shape and those things that don’t. For instance, he envisions a building that fuses elements like catalogue and hotel, passion and space, creating what is called a “hybrid” or “transitional” form of architecture in a critical review that he agrees with. Martin’s ideal architecture is located in the realm between real and non-real, much like the city itself as presented in this novel (240).

Martin Dressler thus makes use of the thin line between factual and imaginative. For example, “The New Dressler,” a building that has eighteen underground stories, seems fictional, for it was technically impossible, at least in the late-nineteenth century. Yet, juxtaposed with Emmeline’s mother’s comment about the concept of the subway being impossible, the reader realizes that the boundary between fantastic possibility and reality in the urban space can be very subtle, almost indefinable and imperceptible (199). This novel does not easily resolve the tension by completely giving in to the realm of the fantastic, but it examines how much non-materiality space can contain, or be invaded by, and still retain its realistic character, a concept manifested by the differences between the two hotels. “The New Dressler,” whose catch phrase is “MORE THAN A HOTEL: A WAY OF LIFE” (235), suggests that it is merely as big as people’s expectations. But the next, his ultimate masterpiece, “The Grand Cosmo,” suffers a catastrophic fate because it aimed to be “limitless” and “complete,” thus embodying an irresoluble ambivalence (249).

Martin Dressler’s New York City is constructed so as to capture the city as a synthesis between material and non-material; it suggests that for a thing to be real, it should include the possibility of coming true. In other words, the real exists within the same imaginative margins where the possibility of realizing the impossible resides. At the same moment, such “impossible” architecture, despite its limitations, aims to be a world in itself. Through this collision between the limitless and the limited, Millhauser shows the essence of the growing urban space that was New York at the turn of the century.

In summary, in Martin Dressler, Millhauser rereads the rags-to-riches story, focusing on the New York and its architecture rather than using the city as a backdrop for a person and his rise. It foregrounds the relationship between material environment and the creator’s desire, and represents this dialectic as the generating force behind the city. Martin Dressler’s hotels are represented as the ultimate product of generative
urban architecture, where material and non-material are inseparable. In depicting these spaces and architecture, Millhauser focuses on the texture of experience rather than the significance or use of the place.

Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and Steven Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*, although not often discussed together, can be seen as two works that have in common a reconsideration of the trope of the American Dream and the individual in the city. Both novels focus on the intensifying space of New York: *American Psycho* consciously parodies American realism and applies its methods to New York society in the 1980s; while, on the other hand, *Martin Dressler* is a historical novel that revisits New York at the turn of the century, focusing on the city’s architecture while attempting to recreate the dynamics of space during this era. These novels can be located within a larger study of the representation of urban space in New York City novels: a realistic genre that tried to capture urban experience through a continuous revision of the image of the rapidly evolving city. By identifying moments of continuity between past and present, this project not only suggests the possibility of reconfiguring American literary history from the mid-nineteenth century onward but also indicates the further possibility of reading the spaces of other various cultural representations in relation to urban architectural structure.
notes

1. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professors Motoyuki Shibata and Ted Goossen for their extensive advice and help.

2. One of the major challenges of cultural studies today is to examine what Arjun Appadurai has called “modernity as a lived experience,” in order to reconstruct how the social and technical changes brought about by modernity are felt and lived by members of society. This concern is particularly relevant when we consider the culture of New York City from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of World War II—when the city experienced nearly a century of unprecedented growth both structurally and socially. In order to get the feel of the urban experience in the growing city, it will be necessary to examine the literature set in New York City during this period, with the focus on the way it represents the architectural environment, for it is the main feature of the city’s transformation. With these premises in mind, this project reasserts the active role of urban space in stimulating new forms of literary representation in relation to the recent discussion on “architecture,” initiated by Lawrence Lessig. This theory focuses on the conceptual plan behind the material structure, opening up the possibility for considering the role that physical structure may play in defining people’s behavior, and will work as key to understand the particular relationship between urban space and the culture it breeds. In fact, the early observations of urban modernity provided by Rem Koolhaas directly addresses New York’s “architecture” in the sense that Lessig later defined. My hypothesis is that the phenomenon is most visible in novels that deal with the story of “the American Dream,” the comedy of manners that involves social change.

3. This was actually a part of intended use; allegedly, a large number of midwestern boys immigrated to the city after reading the Alger novels. Literary representations of this phenomenon include Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams.

4. For discussion on the architecture in this novel, see Salzman, Rodriguez, Fowler, and Ponce.

WORKS CITED


「アメリカの夢」の都市：ブレット・イーストン・エリスとスティーブン・ミルハウザーによる再読

本論文は、19世紀半ばから20世紀のニューヨークを扱った都市小説、特に個人の社会的成功、いわゆる「アメリカの夢」を扱った物語における、都市の役割の変遷について考察する試みの一環である。ホレイショ・アルジャー『ぽろ着のディック』（1868）を一典型とする「立身出世物語（rags-to-riches stories）」において、ニューヨークの都市空間は、単なる物語の背景というだけではなく、主人公の欲望の動きと深く結びついた形で表現され、人物の社会的地位を示す重要な役割を果たしている。この特徴は、シオドア・ドライサーやイーディス・ウォートン等のリアリズム小説の想像力に受け継がれてさらに発展し、世紀転換期のニューヨーク都市表象の重要な要素になった。

このジャンルの現代的展開として重要な作品が、ブレット・イーストン・エリス『アメリカン・サイコ』（1991）とスティーブン・ミルハウザー『マーティン・ドレッサーの夢』（1996）である。二つの小説の内容は全く異なり、共に論じられたことはないが、世紀転換期の「アメリカの夢」の物語に表象されたニューヨークの都市空間を再読し再利用している作品として、同じ文脈で検討される必要がある。

『アメリカン・サイコ』は、「アメリカの夢」の物語を1980年代のニューヨークに当てはめ、成功したビジネスマンの「欲望」の行き場のなさを、ニューヨークの都市空間における閉塞感の進展を描写することで表現している。一方、19世紀末のホテルの経営者を主人公とする『マーティン・ドレッサーの夢』では、伝統的な出世物語が建築に焦点を当てて読み直され、ニューヨークの物理的な都市空間が、そこに託された欲望と密接に関係して成立し、自律的に発展して行く様を描き出している。