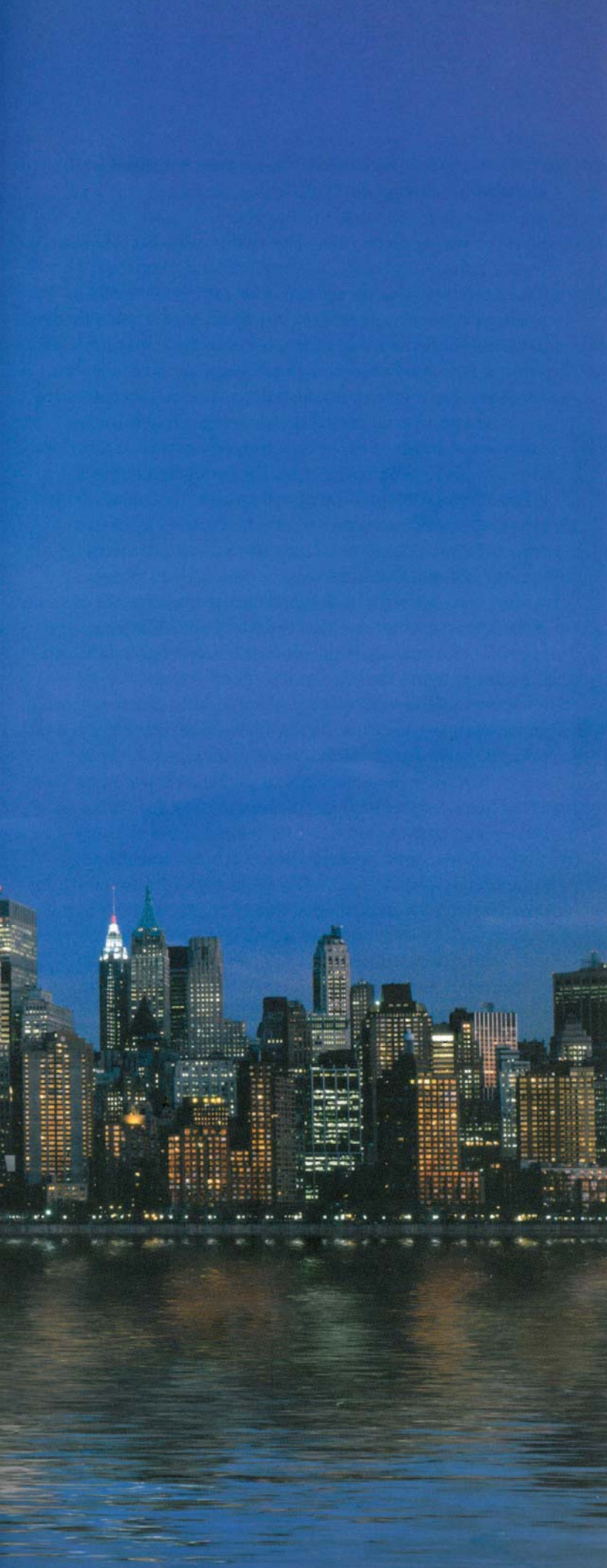


# Our Overdeveloped Sense of Vulnerability







**Industrialised development and the suburban megalopolis are commonly regarded as a threat to nature, contributing to the increasing frailty of the planet and its delicate ecosystems. Here, Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent, looks beyond the immediate environmental factors and assesses the root causes of our ensuing sense of vulnerability, as our worldview is increasingly informed by a collapse in social self-confidence.**

The vast scale of the built environment often invites a dystopian response. The megacity frequently provokes a hostile reaction from the anti-Modernist imagination. In the early 20th century, Oswald Spengler associated the decline of Western civilisation with the rise of the city. He believed that human creativity expanded the gap between people and nature. The very attempt to control nature through the application of technology was a 'monstrous' idea as 'old as the Faustian culture itself'.<sup>1</sup> Pessimistic cultural commentators echoed Spengler's lament and portrayed the construction of large cities as an act of human self-destruction. It was in this vein that Lewis Mumford wrote, in his *The Culture of Cities* of 1938, of the trend towards the implosion of the urban environment.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, such pessimistic accounts failed to capture the popular imagination. Historically, the scale of the built environment inspired in people a sense of awe. The excitement and stimulation of the big city ensured that urbanisation was culturally affirmed in most industrial societies.

In recent decades the growth of what I characterised as a culture of fear has led to a reorientation in how megacities are perceived.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries perceptions of the city as resilient competed with perceptions that stressed its vulnerability. In recent times, issues associated with megacities tend to be framed through the paradigm of vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> This approach is strikingly illustrated in a recently published report: *Megacities – Megarisks*. The authors of this report claim that the very size of megacities makes them vulnerable. It is stated that they are 'practically predestined for risks', and are 'more vulnerable than rural areas'.<sup>5</sup> The report uses the term 'vulnerable' as a metaphor to describe the state of existence of the megacity.

**THINK! Team, proposal for World Cultural Center, New York, 2002–03**

This wonderful megastructural runner-up in the competition to redevelop Ground Zero, argued critic Herbert Muschamp, should have won, but was unfortunately pipped to the post by Daniel Libeskind's 'memorial'. The THINK! Team was Shigeru Ban Architects, Frederic Schwartz Architects, Ken Smith Landscape Architect and Rafael Viñoly Architects.