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More Than Zero

Martin Filler on Architecture

For those of us who believe that architecture is an unfailingly accurate mirror of a society's values, the current state of the proposed redevelopment of Ground Zero offers the most graphic evidence of how little things have changed in this country since September 11, 2001. This is not due, of course, to a lack of attempted involvement by the public in general or the architectural profession in particular. Long before the ruins of the World Trade Center stopped burning, obscenely opportunistic architects began pushing themselves forward for the big job that had opened up with the ground beneath the Twin Towers. The unlucky new lessee of the buildings, Larry Silverstein (who closed on his deal just six weeks before the fatal day), had already contacted Skidmore, Owings & Merrill before the attacks to spiff up the Trade Center so he could attract classier tenants. In the aftermath, Silverstein asked SOM to rebuild 7 World Trade Center (which he had developed and which also fell on September 11) and to come up with ideas for the reconstruction of the entire complex, which is his contractual right. It was assumed in many quarters that the big commission would also go to SOM. But not so fast.

Given public indifference to city planning schemes in the United States in recent years, it must have been something of a shock to the business-as-usual crowd when it became clear that a groundswell of support was rising in favor of an architecturally meaningful and spiritually consoling design. Five days before he left office in December, Rudolph Giuliani spurred the public debate by calling--with the nothing-to-lose candor of the non-incumbent--for "a soaring, monumental, beautiful memorial." He remains the only public official to have spoken out forcefully against the redevelopment debacle that was already beginning to unfold.

Soon everyone wanted to get in on the act. The New York art dealer Max Protetch (who sells modern architectural drawings) self-promotingly solicited what masqueraded as serious proposals for the WTC site, though his ensuing exhibition amounted to a repugantly stylish series of meaningless renderings by a lineup of the usual trendy suspects. Among the more than sixty participants, Daniel Libeskind offered a spiky Deconstructivist spire, Zaha Hadid whipped up one of her typically unintelligible angular agonies, and Hans Hollein made an appalling joke by bridging the roofs of the resurrected Twin Towers with a colossal Oldenburgian assault rifle.

Some months later The New Yorker asked nine artists to imagine a WTC memorial: serious fun, as the Mostly Mozart ads used to say. The deeply unfunny Art Spiegelman knocked off Peter Eisenman's forthcoming Berlin Holocaust memorial with a serried field of 110 one-story Twin Tower replicas on the site of each 110-story structure, "multiplied like those brooms in Fantasia," Spiegelman explained. At least the Disneyfying impulse was overt. The only proposal with any real merit was the sculptor Elyn Zimmerman's dignified minimalist reflecting pools marking the footprints of the lost buildings.

And on September 8 we are to be treated by The New York Times Magazine to its own vision for Ground Zero as imagined by an all-star team selected by Herbert Muschamp, the paper's erratic and ethically challenged architecture critic. Among the participants are said to be such predictable brand names as Peter Eisenman and Richard Meier, second-raters such as Charles Gwathmey and Rafael Vinoly, and a few thoughtful mid-career figures such as Fred Schwartz (who has already proposed moving the bulk of the construction to a newly built-over West Street, west of the WTC site) and Steven Holl (though his silly entry in the Protetch show, for what seemed like freestanding, Trade Center-height elevator shafts wrapped with a diagonal extrusion of enclosed space snaking up around them, does not prompt much hope). According to The New York Observer, "Sources said that the architects have grumbled about having very little technical information about the site. Following contentious meetings with Muschamp," the paper reported, "some members of The Times's design panel have wanted to withdraw altogether."

But far more troublesome than these wishful gestures flimsily tethered to reality were the six all-too-real designs for the WTC site that were unveiled in July by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (a subsidiary of the Empire State Development Corporation), which was established by Governor George Pataki soon after the catastrophe. The authorship of the half-dozen schemes was at first fudged, with the designers' names omitted from the initial public announcement of the uniformly depicted schemes. Always beware an unsigned architectural design. Only later were four of them identified as the work of Beyer Blinder Bell (the esteemed preservation firm responsible for two of its own versions, plus revisions of plans that originated at SOM and Cooper Robertson & Partners). The two other schemes, by Peterson Littenberg Architects, were the most well-received of the lot and led the LMDC to hire the firm to produce a master plan for lower Manhattan.

As is now well known, the six alternatives were all more or less dreadful, and were harshly and rightfully denounced by the architecture critic of the Times and by its editorial page. But institutional back-pedaling at the paper quickly ensued, with a front-page subhead chiding, "Clamor for Fresh Visions of Ground Zero Could Delay Lower Manhattan's Recovery," and, the day after that, an article titled "Even Critics Say Some Designs For Downtown Aren't So Bad." But they are so bad, they really are. Like some pathetic 1960s urban renewal project in a backwater, the awkwardly clustered groupings of high-rise towers were (as the LMDC defensively demurred) only conceptual matrixes around which to focus analysis and debate. To many observers, however, it was the same baloney sliced six different ways. And the sham public "forum" trumped up shortly thereafter at the Javits Center to allow average citizens to voice their opinions deceived no seasoned observers of how large-scale development in New York actually proceeds. The process looked like democracy, but it smelled like money.

The fault lies not with the hapless architects who were asked to dress up this pig of a project, but with the clients themselves, most notably the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. It holds title to the land under the now-vanished structures on which the

developer Silverstein holds a ninety-nine-year lease. Loath to stem any of the considerable revenue stream that the WTC poured into its coffers, the Port Authority insisted that the redevelopment schemes replace virtually all thirteen million square feet lost in the Twin Towers' destruction. Given that the bulk of the space had been contained in the megalithic superstructures, it does not take an architecture expert to understand that if you redistribute the same quantity of volume in considerably shorter, safer buildings--deemed prudent by all concerned--then more ground will have to be covered. And because of the considerable--and to my mind justifiable--public pressure to leave the footprints of the towers vacant (a central demand of the missing victims' families and a feature of four of the six LMDC schemes), the gross overcrowding of the site is inevitable.

In purely economic terms, it would be sheer madness to try to replicate the vast amount of office space that existed in the Twin Towers. The long cycles of boom and bust that characterize property development can take decades to adjust to the forces of supply and demand. There were already millions of square feet of unoccupied commercial real estate in lower Manhattan before Al Qaeda struck, and the recession that the attacks exacerbated has not helped matters one bit. What is truly scandalous, then, in light of the supposedly transformed country in which we have been living since September 11, is how brazenly greedy the Port Authority has been in insisting that it wring every last dollar out of the rebuilding. This is nothing other than war profiteering. In an abject age in which cash-and-carry commercialism disfigures almost every aspect of our public life, this shameful grab proves that even at the mouth of hell the buck still rules.

Although the Port Authority is not directly answerable to the electorate, the governors of the two states controlling it are. No doubt once George Pataki is (almost certainly) returned to office in November, he will reveal his hand. Despite his somewhat clueless personal affect, this cunning politician has so packed the LMDC with people beholden to him that the ultimate direction of the project will be his to decide. American memory could scarcely have been placed in less competent hands.

The embarrassment of the Port Authority's rapacious commercial appetite is too much for some New York officials to bear, and behind-the-scenes maneuverings to avoid an outcome that will only compound the initial disaster are under way. One gambit is to swap the sixteen-acre WTC site for an equal amount of land under New York's two major airports, to give the city autonomy in determining the future of Ground Zero. (Governor Jim McGreevy of New Jersey, the supposed equal of Pataki on the Port Authority, wants Newark Airport cut in on the action as well; because each governor holds veto power over the other, he is likely to get his way.) Such a deal would also, serendipitously, get rid of the unimaginative Silverstein, a solution that the insurers of the Twin Towers are said to embrace eagerly, not least because he is extortionately insisting to be reimbursed for each tower as a separate disaster occurrence, thus doubling the underwriters' liability. (The matter is set for trial in November.) The shock of learning that there was looting at the WTC site in the days after the disaster obviously has not stopped the looting from continuing.

Another response to the outcry against the horrible half-dozen proposals was the hasty decision by the LMDC to hold an international design competition for the World Trade Center site, to be paid for by the LMDC, rather than by the Port Authority, which sponsored most of the initial schemes. To be announced at the end of September, the shortlist is likely to include the standard high-style gang whose names inevitably pop up in such contexts. You can bet that Norman Foster and Renzo Piano will be among them, both for their large-scale urban planning experience as well as their safe balance between modern stylistic acceptability and old-fashioned developer-friendliness. But though the small-scale work of both can be superb, their big civic projects leave much to be desired.

Rem Koolhaas, the author a few decades ago of the heady polemic *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* and now the most overexposed architect since Frank Gehry, is likely to be the token avant-garde contestant. He has already declared his interest, helpfully reminding *The New York Post*: "I seem to be one of the few architects who liked enormously the World Trade Center itself. I was a kind of out-and-out admirer of \$(the towers\$), and I have always defended them." Self-serving though that tribute to Minoru Yamasaki's behemoths may sound, Koolhaas has indeed always indulged a perverse weakness for Nelson Rockefeller's most bombastic architectural boondoggles, particularly those designed by his court architect Wallace K. Harrison, to whose chilly 1950s-style urbanism he paid homage in his retrograde master plan for the French city of Lille.

Perhaps Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, lost in the shuffle at this point, will now be able to reassert itself, and could well be chosen as the conservative counterbalance to the aching hip Koolhaas. And though Frank Gehry has not had much luck in New York--losing the Times headquarters competition to Piano and watching his and Thomas Krens's grandiose plans for a downtown Guggenheim tank with the economy--his status as international architecture's regnant superstar might win him a place on the roster. This universally coveted job has instantly become the Getty of the new millennium, irresistible in its symbolic significance (and its lucrative potential), but it is similarly fraught with peril to the winner's career, as Meier found out with the last "commission of the century."

Several voices of reason have lately cut through the babble with admirable clarity and common sense, suggesting how we might better proceed in dealing with the WTC site. In a well-argued op-ed piece in the Times, Denise Scott Brown urged the opposite of the sweeping "perfect vision" schemes characteristic of postwar urban renewal projects and implicit in the six LMDC proposals. Taking cues from how a place is already used, she wrote, is a much more reliable guide to how it will ultimately function than any superimposed grand design. Thus Scott Brown wisely advocated a slower, more incremental approach to the redevelopment, one that puts particular emphasis on improving the several transportation nodes that converge around the site and providing support for the small start-up businesses that tend to revitalize languishing neighborhoods.

The truth be told, the World Trade Center was neither a very good work of architecture nor a very successful piece of urbanism. Its shortcomings were somewhat mitigated by the westward and southward expansion of the World Financial Center and Battery Park

City during the 1980s. They brought a more humane scale to the area, and created an enlivening connection with the waterfront; and if they, too, were rather lackluster architecturally, at least they succeeded in social terms in creating much-needed spaces for activities more beneficial than mergers and acquisitions.

But the impetus to rebuild quickly--to prove to the terrorists that they have not won, as the propaganda is sure to go-- will be difficult to resist. As the massive, hurried, and thoroughly botched post-reunification development of Berlin has demonstrated, it is a momentous mistake to try to do too much too soon in the reconstruction of big cities. They best evolve organically as the outgrowth of natural social and economic responses; and the flexibility that Scott Brown urges be applied to lower Manhattan is a sound endorsement of that view. Ground Zero, after all, is no Rotterdam or Dresden or Hiroshima in need of a comprehensive rebuilding. This apocalyptically excised chunk of New York calls for reintegration, not for separation; and the former can be achieved whether the site is left entirely as a sacred precinct or partially returned to something approaching its former density.

By far the most cogent set of recommendations advanced in the past year of intense debate over the fate of Ground Zero is contained in a small book by Mike Wallace called *A New Deal for New York*, published this month by his Gotham Center for New York History and Bell & Weiland. Wallace, co-author with Edwin G. Burrows of the magisterial *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, is here as succinct as in his earlier volume he was expansive. In fewer than a hundred hand-sized pages, he outlines specifics for both the WTC site--like Giuliani, he is in favor of it remaining wholly public and non-commercial--and the regeneration of the surrounding metropolis in its entirety.

More importantly, Wallace places the project within its larger regional and national context, delineated with a breadth of historical learning and socio-political insight not seen since Lewis Mumford gave forth his two late-life masterworks, *The Pentagon of Power* and *The Myth of the Machine*, three decades ago. Wallace sees the cogs of an infernal machine much at work here, and the connections that he draws between the profound governmental and corporate corruption we now face in this country and the creation of viable cities are powerful and perfectly timely. He neatly turns the Bush-administration mantra of the past year on its head by pointing out that when it comes to saving our great cities, and downtown New York especially, extreme measures are called for, because "we are, are we not, in a quasi-wartime condition?"

Stressing the need to look beyond September 11 for ways of turning tragedy into triumph, Wallace rejects outright the canard that sufficient financial resources are simply not available to rebuild our cities. "For all our current woes," he wryly points out, "the U.S.A. is not Afghanistan, nor is New York Kabul. This is a rich city, in a rich state, in a rich country. We must therefore reframe the discussion by first asking, 'where's the money gone?'" In this scandal-ridden year of executive thievery exposed and the Bush administration's understandable reluctance to probe very deeply into Enron and other corporate con jobs, we are learning the grim answer to Wallace's question.

Wallace decries welfare for the rich not just in its New York incarnation-- successive mayors bribing big firms that have no intention of leaving town to remain here nonetheless--but in its broader and more destructive national manifestation, which robs cities and their citizens of their rightful revenues. He urges "a push to replace tax breaks to corporations and the rich, with a massive transfer of federal monies, under reasonable federal guidelines, back to badly strapped states and localities. This could be the source of funding for many of the kinds of projects for which New Yorkers are now calling."

If much of this sounds historically familiar, it is. In his call to common sense, Wallace writes: "We should launch a massive program to create and enhance the nation's social capital--investing in people and resources in a way we haven't done recently but used to do brilliantly. I'm talking about something far greater than the anemic 'stimulus packages' that were bruited about for awhile. What we need, I think, is a new New Deal." Here, many will say, is where Wallace writes himself out of the picture. And he is himself the first to admit that "certainly the fundamentalist Republicans holed up in the House would fight any such initiative to the death. After all, if right-wing Republicans have a core belief (apart from imposing one or another brand of cultural authoritarianism) it's to overthrow what remains of the old New Deal." Perceptive historian that he is, Wallace acknowledges that any attempted re-creation of Roosevelt's New Deal would be doomed to failure (as parts of it were the first time around).

What Wallace wants instead is a concerted, high-minded national effort to reverse the past twenty years of faux populism subsumed under the Reaganite imperative to Get Big Guv'm'nt Off Our Backs. To put a finer point on the commonweal's systematic turning away from the common good, he nicely revives the word "privateer," which two centuries ago meant pirate but which he now uses to brand those who assert that wholesale privatization is the best of all possible governance. Wallace is proposing a bold and even quixotic goal, but he is unafraid to insist that the undoing of the New Deal at its best has had dire consequences that the double blow of the terrorist attacks and the recession has only highlighted, not created.

And as sanguine as Wallace is in his specific prescriptions for making lower Manhattan whole again, he is mindful of how larger events could readily endanger any broad-based recovery effort. He cautions that "any number of global developments--another oil embargo, another terror attack, an invasion of Iraq gone bad, a repatriation of European loans, the collapse of important regional economies--might trigger a new downward slide." Though he is no Jeremiah in the vein of Mumford, his Mumfordian view of the city as an organism inextricably linked to larger political and economic forces allows him no other choice. Wallace here returns to the time-honored tradition of the pamphlet, which his predecessor Mumford used to train the attention of bien pensant laymen on topics ranging from the threat of Hitler to life in wartime to the specter of nuclear annihilation. This is just what we need now, and Wallace has risen to the occasion splendidly.

As this rapidly changing story continues to evolve in the weeks and months ahead, making many assessments obsolete before they reach print, we will surely be hearing

more and more about style once the WTC competition finalists are announced. The presence of publicity-savvy architect-stars will tend to shift attention toward the question of how the rebuilding will look and away from the question of how it will serve the larger issues at stake. But until some determination is made as to the decent limits of commercial profit at Ground Zero, the competition will remain a costume party. Each participant will merely be dressing up a pre-determined bulk of developer-decreed space, a larger-scale and considerably uglier version of the drag show that high-rise office design has been for decades now.

It is difficult not to be cynical about the probable outcome of this effort. Wallace emphasizes that the New Deal was a New York-born and bred phenomenon: its principal architect had been governor of the state, its chief instigators grew out of the city's vigorous reform movement, and the city served as a proving ground for many programs that were later expanded nationwide. But George Pataki is no Franklin Roosevelt; about this, surely, we can all agree. And nowhere in the noise of this discussion, all the post-September pieties and pontifications notwithstanding, is there anything like the sense of historical urgency that gave the New Deal its writ. I dread to contemplate the dire circumstances that would finally galvanize the populace and its leaders to the kind of purposeful and far-reaching response for which current conditions already cry out, but it may take yet another, even more catastrophic event to prompt us into such morally proportionate action.

Alas, there is no single commanding figure on the horizon to oversee the redevelopment of lower Manhattan, let alone the more thoroughgoing initiatives that Wallace calls for. Architecture and urban design by committee never works. An individual vision is essential, albeit one receptive to the concerns of many. I do not mean an autocrat such as Robert Moses, who was long left to his own devices in New York because he was initially so effective, until his megalomania became so unbridled that it poisoned the quality of his increasingly out-of-control schemes. I have in mind someone such as the late Edward Logue, who as the head of urban development in New Haven, Boston, and New York state for four decades from the 1950s onward exercised a generally benign influence in shepherding huge architectural and infrastructure programs to completion. Though some of his specific projects seem misguided in hindsight, Logue was a champion of affordable urban housing, and he loved architecture and the culture of cities.

The inherent American distrust of the city, stemming from the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian republic of small landowners, is at the root of the problem that now confronts New York. But as Wallace bluntly puts it, New York took the hit for the nation as a whole, and it is owed its recompense. What rises from the abyss of Ground Zero will become the most revealing American urban expression of our times. Let us hope that its importance is not lost on those whose own reputations--not in the arts pages but in the history books--will hang in the balance.

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