

In the absence of an explanation: the World Trade Center memorial site

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Reflecting Absence, by Michael Arad and Peter Walker, was selected as the design for New York City's World Trade Center Site memorial this past January, after what was billed as "the largest design competition in history" by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), which sponsored it. Despite the fanfare, the design is widely considered a disappointment, though an effort is being made to address its technical defects and make the best of it. Nevertheless, contention over the site is likely to continue.

In the face of a genuine need on the part of those affected by the attacks of September 11, 2001, to mourn and heal, the building of a memorial has been seized upon to promote a sense of "closure" where one is entirely lacking. It has been pushed through in the absence of a full and independent investigation of the 9/11 terror attacks, as if the facts and roots of the event being memorialized were already known and clarified.

For many, particularly among the victims' families, this hurry-up attitude on the part of the corporate and political interests is resented. The developers, who include the New York/New Jersey Port Authority, which owns the property, private developer Larry A. Silverstein, who had just signed a 99-year lease on the World Trade Center only six weeks before it was destroyed, and Westfield America, a mall conglomerate that controlled the 430,000 square feet of retail space, have been suspected all along, and with reason, of being primarily concerned with restoring their lost office and retail space.

Profits, and likewise city and state tax-revenues, are being lost every day that the site remains undeveloped. Approximately \$135 million in property taxes alone have been lost due to the destruction of the World Trade Center and damages to the adjacent World Financial Center.

The nature and the magnitude of the terror attacks, and their emblematic status, however, have made it impossible for the corporate and political elite behind the redevelopment to pursue their goals openly. Unable to risk being seen as disregarding the desires of the victims' families and survivors, the LMDC, representing these elites, has repeatedly used the tactic of soliciting public input, holding design competitions, and mounting exhibitions while maintaining tight control over final decisions and moving ahead with the schedule.

Not a popularly elected body, the LMDC is a joint State-City corporation governed by a 16-member Board of Directors, half appointed by the governor of New York and half by the mayor of New York City; it has final say over what is built. It claims to be "committed to an open, inclusive, and *transparent planning process* in which the public has a central role in shaping the future of Lower Manhattan." As in corporate accounting practices, "transparent" tends to mean anything but.

The first six proposals for the overall site were drawn up by one architectural firm, Beyer Blinder Belle, and were unveiled by the LMDC in July 2002—that is, less than a year after the attacks and while the massive recovery and clearing efforts were still being completed. A press conference was followed by a public meeting at the Javits Center attended by 5,000 people. All six plans were rejected for being "primarily concerned with arranging eleven million square feet of office space around Ground Zero."

Alexander Garvin, the LMDC's chief of planning, grandly scrapped them all, and instead chose seven architectural firms to participate in what he called the Innovative Design Study. Although meant to be a competition/collaboration, Garvin indicated his preference for using Daniel Libeskind Studio from the outset. Although it missed the initial deadline for participation, Garvin solicited a design from the firm and extended the deadline so that it could participate. (Libeskind is well known for having built a de-facto Holocaust memorial at the Jewish museum in Berlin.)

Libeskind's design for the Freedom Tower and three other 60-story office buildings was chosen, although it has been modified somewhat by Silverstein's architect, David Childs, of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. It has been praised for the "torque" of the Freedom Tower echoing the Statue of Liberty and how the asymmetrical glass towers "recapture the skyline." But, bottom line, they are still four skyscrapers towering over Ground Zero, and their more "innovative" design likened to "lipstick on a hog" by Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association, a civic group.

From the start, the LMDC faced its most intense opposition from victims' families' groups like Monica Iken and her September's Mission, who insisted that the entire site be considered "sacred space" and exempt from any and all commercial development. Therefore, it strategically decided to make the design for the memorial a separate component of the redevelopment; Libeskind's master plan needed only to leave room for a memorial, not design one.

Once they were able to get Iken and other advocates of "sacred space" to be satisfied with leaving the "footprints" of the two original towers intact, the rest of the site could be developed as planned—though who knows how much arm-twisting was involved. It would seem that part of the deal involved giving Iken a stake in the future memorial's interpretive center. In any case, her energies have been redirected toward fundraising for the educational and cultural programming there.

Another even larger charade of popular participation was then mounted

for the design of the memorial itself. Entries were accepted from anyone who applied in conformity with the mission statement and competition guidelines, not just professional architects and designers. As a result, the 13-member jury reviewed 5,201 submissions from 63 nations, and 49 of the 50 United States. (Apparently, no one from Alaska participated.) All the entries were recently posted online at www.wtcsitememorial.org.

Predictably, the variety of ideas received was enormous, and impressive, in its way. There was no lack of imagination and sincerity, if not always sophistication, on the part of those who sought to concretize the significance of 9/11 for masses of people in a fitting, moving physical memorial. But the unsuitability or impracticality of most of the projects only highlights the cynical manipulation at the heart of the process.

Jorge Jabour, from Rio de Janeiro, proposed a huge geodesic egg surrounded by flags of all nations; Desmond Hui of Hong Kong suggested two ghostly white passenger planes with the names of victims on the seats. There were also Big Apples, and clocks stopped at 9:11.

A couple of designs, interestingly both from the Middle East, addressed underlying issues more directly. A giant question mark by Ahmend Kamel Almrakzy of Cairo, Egypt asked “when, who, what, why?” And in a submission that was as much a personal statement as a design, Yasir Sakr of Amman, Jordan described himself as having been a fundamentalist, but that the events of September 11 had made him renounce his previous approach to life. “The Twin Towers may have crumbled but so too has the legitimacy of all fundamentalist doctrines that trivialize the ‘other’ in the name of a grand design.”

The jury, again selected by the LMDC, had six months to review all the entries, during which time additional public exhibits and surveys were held. They finally narrowed the field to three finalists, which were all professional architect/design teams.

Even though all of the final designs received more negative than positive votes in a survey by the Municipal Arts Society, NY1, *Gotham Gazette* and the *Daily News*, the jury still went ahead and selected *Reflecting Absence* by Michael Arad, who is an architect with the City’s Housing Authority, and landscape architect Peter Walker. Necessitating an eleventh-hour bargaining session sequestered at Gracie Mansion, the mayor’s official residence, it was in fact only the jury’s third choice among the finalists, and received 633 negative to only 382 positive votes in the popular survey.

The hype—as though the jury was setting a life-and-death legal precedent when in fact it was selecting an architectural design, and only a handful of the 5,000+ entries were ever even remotely feasible—only highlights that this process was organized for public consumption only. That this charade of “responding to the will of the people” is being enacted under conditions where genuine expressions of popular will, either through political or judicial channels, has been considerably eroded—with September 11 most often used as a justification—makes it particularly distasteful.

New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman lambasted the process as an ineffective means for choosing a design for a public memorial, or any architectural space. In a December 7, 2003, article entitled “Ground Zero’s Only Hope: Elitism,” he urges, “forget vapid populism. Limit the competition to participants of the jury’s expert choosing. Then let the jury select the best plan, if and when there is one. If that’s elitism, so be it.”

Calling for all the plans to be dumped, he points out, “the nation hasn’t even begun to grasp the historic meaning of the attacks. But already there is concern about falling behind schedule.”

While not mentioning the stonewalling by the Bush administration as among the factors actively preventing a grasp of the historic meaning of the events, Kimmelman does acknowledge that commercial and political pressures are behind the rush to get the project done. He also recognizes that “the open competition insulates the LMDC and the mayor and the governor. If the winner is no good, don’t blame them; democratic

competitions are only as good as the people who choose to take part in them.”

Kimmelman’s call for elitism, however, overlooks one major point, namely that the architecture and design firms are justifiably seen as dependent upon, if not actively part of, that same commercial and political establishment that is so mistrusted. There would be no reason why professional architects and designers—working on behalf of and responsive to the priorities of those who want a genuine memorial, with all that implies, and balanced with the needs of residents, workers, and visitors in the area—wouldn’t be able to use their talents and expertise to design an unparalleled public memorial space.

But this would only be possible under conditions that do not have to ultimately accommodate the profit needs of the corporate developers, and in which a full accounting for the events 9/11 were made public, including the involvement of these same corporate interests in US government policies that serve to provoke terrorism as a response, albeit a disoriented and reactionary one.

In the absence of this, the memorial proposed by Arad and Walker, with too many masters to please, ends by pleasing no one. It duly and rather dully preserves the “footprints” of the two Trade Towers as twin reflecting pools—200-square-foot voids set 30 feet below ground and fed by walls of falling water. Visitors will descend by ramps to underground viewing areas, and memorial chambers. The names of the victims of both the September 11, 2001, and the February 26, 1993, attacks on the World Trade Center will be etched on the walls. There will also be an area in the north tower footprint that will house unidentified remains of the victims. A nearby interpretive center will display artifacts such as mangled fire trucks and steel girders, and give a history of the World Trade Center and an account of the events of September 11.

Immediately upon its unveiling, the design was criticized as impractical, and that would indeed seem to be the case. Walls of falling water in an open pit and without glass barriers are a problem, especially in inclement weather. Wind (and the area tends to be windy) will spray water on visitors as they try to take rubbings of names on the walls. In the winter, the waterfalls will need to be turned off; if heated, they will cause a frosty mist. In short, there are a host of problems.

While some letter writers to the *New York Times* found the memorial design “moving and powerful,” or “healing and uplifting,” others criticized it for selecting prettiness (though it is rather grim on the whole) over relevance, and not respecting the wishes of the families of the victims. Joan Molinaro, mother of a firefighter killed on 9/11, considers that “*Reflecting Absence* is empty, void of honor, truth, emotion and dignity.” Predictably, the conflict as well as plans for construction will carry on.

It has been said that people get the memorial they deserve, but the victims and survivors of the World Trade Center attacks deserve more than a memorial that is little more than a cover-up. They deserve a full and open accounting for the events that took loved ones’ lives and caused ongoing trauma; only then can an appropriate memorial be created. Ironically, *Reflecting Absence*, which promises to remain a large, uncomfortable void, like an irritated wound that won’t heal, is an unintentionally fitting emblem of the failure to adequately account for the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.



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