

### **Planning, Rhetorically: Memorial Preoccupation in the Libeskind Proposal**

Daniel Libeskind's victorious plan for redevelopment of the World Trade Center site is a composition built on the manipulation of the vantage point: it takes the gaze skyward even as it guides the viewer through a descent to a plaza 30 feet below street level and then another 40 feet further to bedrock. Or, conversely, it takes this viewer to an unparalleled built altitude, 1776 feet high, from which he may look down into the pit from which he has ascended. In either scenario, the controlling perceptual axis around which Libeskind arranges the site is vertical, rendering immaterial the quotidian plane of occupied space. It asks the pilgrim to ascend, to descend, to transcend – to move out of his mundane path, in any direction, in the name of reverence and remembrance.

As memorial, the plan is brilliant. It hallows the skyline as well as the ground, evoking both postures – standing and fallen – of the original towers without intimating that they can or should be restored. Memorial, however, is but one aspect of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation's stated tripartite vision for the World Trade Center site, which calls for us to "rebuild" and "renew" as well as "remember," emphasizing that the success of each individual facet will depend on the extent to which it can coexist with the other two in a functionally multi-faceted urban environment.

While the LMDC, in deferring the memorial competition for Ground Zero until after the selection of a site plan, seems to have taken into serious account this necessity of ensuring a diverse programmatic context for the forthcoming memorial, the public has generally shown its redevelopment priorities to be more narrowly focused on issues of

commemoration. Thus, in the atmosphere of unusually intensive public participation that has surrounded the design debate, the LMDC's postponement of the memorial process has, in effect, generated a site plan that itself takes the memorial project as its foremost concern. In keeping with generally prevailing concepts of memorialization, public discussion of all the proposals centered – in the absence of a distinct memorial competition – on monumentality and thus on the built symbol, allotting the greatest weight in assessments of the plans to striking architectural statement and thereby neglecting many of the broader land use questions that a site plan should ostensibly consider and resolve.

An indictment of the architectural preoccupation that has characterized the debate thus far by no means implies, however, that either architectural form or public preference should – or indeed could – be consigned to irrelevance in the redevelopment process. The ordering of priorities we have witnessed undoubtedly derives in large part, and justifiably so, from the nature of the event that is to be memorialized at Ground Zero, the most dramatic and lingering public manifestation of which was initially and continues to be the jarring absence of buildings where buildings of such overwhelming mass once stood. Even if we do not indulge in misplaced nostalgia for those ill-considered pillars, the precedent set by the vanished towers – which were, above all, an architectural rather than a spatial or street-level statement – seems to demand a potent architectural response in redevelopment, as the vast majority of the site plan design proposals recognized quite eloquently.

We should, however, be wary of allowing architectural form to act as a stand-in in public debate for the equally critical non-memorial elements of the agenda articulated by

the LMDC. The thrust of Libeskind's site plan, imbued as it is with the memorial objective (indeed, the plan is entitled "Memorial Foundations"), seems to be that the project of memorialization alone can more or less effectively encompass the additional programmatic elements of renewal and rebuilding. His presentation brims with democratic symbolism and populist sentiment (the "Park of Heroes," the now eliminated "Gardens of the World"), yet it expresses these ideals most explicitly in architectural elements alone, giving only minimal attention to the finer points of potential public use within and around the grand symbolic forms that he would have define both space and program.

As his selection for the site planning project has already demonstrated, Libeskind's memorial architecture is an immensely powerful response to widespread public demand for immediate and appropriate steps toward commemoration. As such, the crux of his plan is primarily representational, and therein lies the risk of allowing the memorial element to guide the agenda for the entire site: as the memorial function diminishes somewhat (as it will, with distance from the event, and potentially sooner for those for whom the World Trade Center site will become local public space), alternative programmatic elements must rise to complement it, to accommodate and foster shifting patterns of use in a way that Libeskind does not seem to anticipate. It remains to be seen whether his spire and open plazas might transcend mere symbolism to embody the populist ideals they profess or whether they will be simply built simulacra, the emptiness of which becomes apparent only as the resonance of their controlling symbols wanes. While we can hope for the former, we must nonetheless be vigilant in ensuring that we are building so as to preclude the latter.