

Historical Dialogue and Human Involvement in Libeskind's Proposal

Through the preservation of the subterranean “bathtub” and the slurry walls of the World Trade Center, Daniel Libeskind’s proposal incorporates an element of legitimacy physically linking the visitor to the past. Yet the strength of the proposal lies not simply in its preservation of authentic remains. Rather than simply recalling events, the proposal transcends its design by addressing humanity and encouraging a critical engagement with history.

One must seek to understand the past before asking how it might contribute to future well-being. The Libeskind proposal announces resilience in the face of terrorism, yet it doesn’t clear away the traces of the event or eradicate the destruction. Literal reminders acknowledging the destruction are then combined with symbolic elements in order to encourage individual thought and questioning. For example, the wedge of light captures the sun’s track during the fateful hours of September 11 while also inducing personal reflection and contemplation. The “Gardens of the World” enlivens the New York City skyline while simultaneously acting as tranquil space in which to meditate on the affirmation of life. The slurry walls announce the past event, but they also suggest the continued relevance of the past to our daily lives.

Historical knowledge begins by looking towards the past, but it is achieved only through also debating the present and looking towards the future. The unshakable “bathtub” of the World Trade Center managed to prevent the Hudson’s waters from flooding Lower Manhattan. By preserving this aspect of the site, Libeskind draws attention to a form of durability and strength that was unseen by most until the attack in

September. Libeskind does not yield to the desire to replace the site as it was, and he reminds us that the real asset of the place was not necessarily the towering forms of the towers. The World Trade Center may have functioned as a marker of collective identity, but in reality, the site was also viewed by its attackers as a symbol of envy and hatred. Before September 11, the buildings were even viewed with contempt by some Americans. Although many of the proposals have been criticized as simply recapping the program when the towers were first conceived, Libeskind seems to acknowledge the need for a new perspective. Because the World Trade Center was a site evoking a variety of emotions and responses, any attempt to restore the towers as a symbolic statement of American ideals would have been inaccurate.

The THINK proposal was too abstract and reminiscent of the World Trade Center. Although it presented a bold conceptual rethinking of the site in terms of function, the proposal seemed almost too affirmative and harmonious. The championing of the World Cultural Center and the evocation of the previous form of the towers seemed to form a univocal vision of national resolve that was too commemorative of the form and message of the previous buildings. The literal reminder of the plane crashing through the towers attempted to balance the proposal, but it imposed itself on the viewer and drew attention to the destruction of the buildings rather than the importance of human life. Libeskind has embraced Walter Benjamin's belief that looking to the past consists of examining the history of both the victors and the vanquished. His forms are symbolic and affirming, but they provide for more open contemplation and greater historical awareness.

The Libeskind proposal functions as both patient and doctor, truthfully articulating the problem and then seeking to cure it. The THINK proposal supported the ideas of difference and debate through the inclusion of a World Cultural Center, but it did not fully address the problem or the core presence of conflict in society. The THINK proposal included elements of memory in the design, but the Libeskind proposal ultimately enables a fuller engagement with history. By exploring the past and enabling historical awareness, the proposal leaves the door open for a critique of the present. By allowing the visitor to approach the site with unarmed and open eyes, Libeskind more fully addresses a heterogeneous and multi-layered society.

Libeskind's proposal strengthens the values and principles of our collective society by initially appealing to the individual. The spaces for individual contemplation and meditation allow individuals to approach with their own preferences and needs. But the site also provides a space for members of a society with common needs and hopes to come together in their grief. By providing a variety of functions and building types at the site, Libeskind's proposal draws attention to the true spirit of the city. The heart of the New York lies not within the World Trade Center, but within the city's dynamic energy and diverse humanity. The proposal's elevated walkway or memorial promenade allows memory to integrate itself with the vibrant reality of the city and its hopes for the future.

In addition to thinking about the ways one can link people to place, one should also consider how forms can link people to people. No oneness or fundamental inherent meaning to a place exists without human involvement. Our memory of September 11 is linked to a human interference with place, and the place afterwards will be linked to our response and involvement with history. Libeskind's proposal transcends architecture and

material form by encouraging individuals to engage themselves fully with the past and come together for collective renewal. The need to come to terms with the past may not be as strong in future years, but one cannot learn from history if one does not know it. Rather than seeking to address the soul of the world, one should first acknowledge our ability to learn from and be touched by other individuals. In designing the memorial for the site, an even greater attempt should be made to connect present and future lives with past lives. Libeskind has presented a proposal that encourages individual thought and the development of historical knowledge. The memorial and the museum should continue this pattern of human involvement by serving as sites of layered personal records, critical thinking, and human communication.