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5/11/02

### City Streets, City Life:

#### Rethinking Libeskind's use of the Street in Lower Manhattan

New Yorkers live on the street. We walk on the street, we eat food from street vendors, and we occupy the street while participating in jobs and activities 24 hours a day. For this reason, the appeal of a streetscape to pedestrians greatly determines the vitality of a given area. Places such as the former World Trade Center site and public housing projects that have utilized the superblock, which hampers the ability of pedestrians to navigate themselves in relation to the surrounding streets, lack 24-hour street vitality. Meanwhile, places such as Greenwich Village and the area around Penn Station that work within the existent fabric of New York City's streets are vivacious parts of the city around the clock. In fact, city planners and politicians alike have stated that one of the goals of rebuilding Lower Manhattan is to create a 24-7 vivacious neighborhood that will reflect New York's "City that Never Sleeps" way of life. Nonetheless, Libeskind's street and land use design take away street life in exchange for what is supposed to become a cleaner, more orderly area by utilizing the super-block, creating a large newly constructed transportation building and, in certain places, completely removing the street. I argue that the tactics of Libeskind's design scheme will

hinder rather than help the vitality of Lower Manhattan, meaning that the goal of creating a 24-7 community around Ground Zero will not be achieved.

Life in New York City begins – and ends - with pedestrian street travel. A New Yorker is a pedestrian by nature; anyone who attempts to drive in Manhattan is either a fool or a taxi driver. For the rest of us, the design and nature of the streets define our everyday experience. Short streets with diverse uses and varying visual schemes create an interesting, worthwhile pedestrian experience. The current street design and land use scheme do not reflect this need. Replacing Fulton Street with a pedestrian walkway takes away the most fundamental part of street life – the street itself. The street comprises more than just transportation; cars provide light and informal “eyes on the street” that provide a sense of safety to the New Yorker. Street vendors and street performers fill a similar role through their constant presence in an area. The street is an egalitarian space to which businessmen, teenagers and vendors alike have a right. Out of such egalitarianism, organic vitality can take place. However, in order to ensure the safety of a pedestrian walkway that lies between two enormous buildings 24 hours a day, formal eyes on the street, such as security officers and security cameras, are needed. The security officers will have the role of deciding who does and does not belong in a public space. Rarely do security officers condone the existence of groups of teenagers who reflect alternative lifestyles or peddling street vendors—two populations that harmlessly add energy to the City. The result will be a pseudo-public space – a place that appears to be for all, but is actually only intended for a specific population. This population entails businessmen, upper-middle class residents and tourists, all of whom fall into the same demographic pool. Their lifestyles will reflect this similarity; for this reason, significant

life on the pseudo-streets will not exist much past midnight, leaving the space vacant for seven or eight hours each day.

The brilliance of New York City's transportation system lies in its integration into the fabric of New York City's street life. One can walk across the city or take a cab without noticing the existence of the subway system, unless one intentionally looks for an "M" sign rising from the ground. Penn Station exemplifies the effects of this integration. Below ground, the transportation hub links the city to the Long Island Railroad, New Jersey Transit, Amtrak, and the subway. Meanwhile, above ground at the same geographic location as Penn Station lies Madison Square Garden. This cultural and entertainment facility brings people from across the city, if not the nation, into the area, which in turn adds to the street life. Essentially, the integration of transportation into the city's fabric allows space to be used twice – once underground and once above ground.

In contrast, the current plan for a transportation hub in Lower Manhattan clashes with the life of the street. Rather than integrating with the already existing street life on Fulton and Dey Streets, the MTA plans to create a gargantuan glass building in the place of older buildings (along with their businesses) that currently exist. At street level, many of the mixed-use buildings will be torn down. The MTA pleasantly describes the demolition of The Corbin Building, which is a skyscraper that was built in 1889, for their shiny, glass-façade building. Tearing down the old buildings will take away diverse street life. Despite their plan, the MTA is aware of this result. If one looks carefully at the before and after pictures promoted by the MTA, the before picture shows a variety of types of people walking down the street (see image 1). A man with a bicycle, a man wearing a backpack, and a woman walking with a child are all walking next to a

businessman. In contrast, all of the people walking next to the new, single-use transportation hub appear to be dressed in formal, businessperson attire (see image 2). This reflects the effects of supplanting the current diversity of buildings with the shiny, new building. A second example of potentially destroying street life occurs at the south side of Dey Street. Currently, this street contains many storefronts that are essential to city life. The before picture displays the existence of a vibrant, active street life - even on a cold winter day (see image 3). The after picture displays an empty, “negative” space – a space that exists entirely for the sake of getting somewhere else (see image 4). Though the MTA claims that the proposed model of the transportation hub is only conceptual, they are sending a clear message, nonetheless: The effort to build a new transportation hub will not become a part of the greater street context of Lower Manhattan.

The use of the superblock is yet another way that pedestrian flow will be inhibited. Most notably, Ground Zero retains the superblock form that was created in the 1970’s (see image 5, #'s 10,11). In order for anyone to get from West Side Park to Greenwich Street he or she has to walk around the entire Ground Zero site, which is approximately the distance of walking from the 115<sup>th</sup> street and Broadway gates at one side of Columbia University to the 115<sup>th</sup> Street gates on Amsterdam by walking north on Broadway, east on 120<sup>th</sup> Street, and South on Amsterdam Avenue until reaching 115<sup>th</sup> Street (see image 6, red route). If the gates are locked, this ten minute walk would be avoided unless it were absolutely necessary. However, if the 115<sup>th</sup> street gates were unlocked, a pedestrian would walk directly through Columbia’s campus on College Walk and less than two minutes later arrive at 115<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam (see image 6, green route). The superblock of Ground Zero has been and will remain like Columbia’s

campus with the gates locked - walking around the site will be avoided if at all possible. In addition, the same effect will result from the two unnecessarily long blocks that exist between Vesey Street and the Fulton Pedestrian Pathway (see image 5, #'s 1+2, 3+4). Libeskind proposes building pairs of connected towers of commercial space and cultural space (#'s 1+2) and commercial space and hotel space (3+4) north of Fulton Street. Like the superblock of Ground Zero, the area will not be conducive to pedestrian life; to get from one side of the street to the other, a pedestrian must walk around a two large buildings. Though it would be possible to place a street between buildings number 1 and 2, and 3 and 4, Libeskind opted against this design. Because the streets are not conducive for pedestrians to navigate, pedestrians will be less likely to use the area as efficiently as possible.

Still another form in which street life will be sapped from the Ground Zero area is the proportion of retail space that lies underground compared to above ground. Of the 880,000 square feet of planned retail space, half is supposed to reside below ground within easy access to the subway stations (see image 5, #'s 1,3,6,7). While logic lies behind building some retail underground, the amount of retail underground should not approach the amount of retail above ground. It would then be sensible for shoppers to travel to Lower Manhattan, shop underground, and return home without ever reaching ground level. This possibility endangers the vitality of Lower Manhattan because the atmosphere of a street has an intangible energy that cannot be replicated within the confines of a transportation center or an underground mall. A controlled environment in this form will not allow the organic chemistry of the street to take place.

We have been here before. When the World Trade Center was created, it was supposed to remake Lower Manhattan from a struggling part of the city into a larger-than-life symbol of the Big Apple. We saw the tallest buildings in the world erected and, at first, considered them great. The everyday form of the street was ignored and the notion of the super-block was employed, which turned the World Trade Center into an enclave in which businessmen were isolated from the rest of the city. Old buildings were torn down to construct new, arguably prettier and cleaner ones in their place. Today, city planners render the results of these planning techniques a failure because street life was non-existent after the end of the business day. Is it not alarming that, once again, the focus of remaking Lower Manhattan remains on the grand scale of the buildings and blocks rather than on the future vitality of the street? By making many of the same mistakes that were made thirty years ago, the current streetscape and land use scheme will fail to create the 24-7 vitality that the city planners and politicians responsible for the rebuilding process claim to desire.