

I.

Can we still dream impossible dreams? When Robert Moses bestrode the state like a colossus, things happened. Rivers were spanned with gleaming steel trusses. Highways were threaded through the city and its suburbs, and pulsed with cars and trucks. Slums were torn down, and replaced with modern housing complexes that promised to improve the lives of their inhabitants. One slum gave way to Lincoln Center, the gleaming cathedral of culture that secured the artistic primacy of the city. Vacant lots and old rail yards became parks and playgrounds for the children. New York moved forward to the steady drumbeat of progress.

Can we learn from our past mistakes? When Robert Moses was the construction czar of New York, he answered only to himself. His putative masters, the mayor and the governor, came and went while he remained the single constant in the government. He ruthlessly gutted neighborhoods in the name of progress. He wrapped the city in highways like so many tourniquets, cutting off the vital circulation of people from one block to the next. He began projects aware that he lacked the funding to complete them, and then used his half-finished bridges and roads to justify further allocations. He spent billions on infrastructure, but failed to build a single mile of new track for public transit. His parks were built in white neighborhoods, his substandard housing projects in black areas. New York was twisted to meet his autocratic vision.

These two questions continue to animate the world of urban planning. There is an undeniable appeal to projects that fix more than one building, one block. Without such sweeping visions, cities are consigned to change only incrementally, and their problems

seem almost intractable. At the same time, there is broad consensus that projects that attempt to remake a neighborhood or a city in one fell swoop have a poor record of success. This apparent paradox has made it difficult for architects and planners to tackle the major problems of urban areas.

Both assumptions have recently been called into question. During the 1970s, the Bronx was a synonym for urban decay. Every night, the fires of the arsonists glowed like beacons of distress. It was Fort Apache, the blighted core, the wasteland. But just as the Bronx reached its nadir, it began to show new signs of life. There were few large-scale projects, and there was certainly no sweeping vision. But in one neighborhood, a few dozen local residents banded together to repair a derelict building, creating twenty-one new units of affordable housing. The Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association, as the group came to call itself, has since rehabilitated more than 2,000 additional units, and launched a host of other programs.

Banana Kelly is only one of many such organizations in the Bronx and elsewhere in New York, and collectively, they are challenging the conventional wisdom about the nature of urban problems. As non-profit organizations, they do not have to submit to the legislature beautifully illustrated schemes or sweeping visions in order to justify their funding. Their organizers and leaders do not need ribbon-cutting ceremonies or grand edifices to bolster their hopes of reelection. Instead, they have discovered that many small-scale solutions can have a tremendous cumulative effect. As members of the communities in which they operate, the leaders of these organizations are uniquely sensitive to local problems, and able to capitalize on local strengths. These organizations, however, offer no panaceas. The scope and scale of their projects is limited by their

modest capitalization. Additionally, most of their projects must be revenue-producing, in order to fund future work. This renders them unable to tackle infrastructure projects, massive redevelopment schemes, or other areas that have traditionally fallen within the scope of governmental authority. Moreover, they rely upon a core of concerned citizens, who are willing to invest time and money in rehabilitating their neighborhoods and improving the quality of life for those who live around them. There are never enough committed citizens to tackle all of the problems of urban areas.

Recent governmental projects have also been challenging convention. The historic preservation movement has heightened the awareness of public officials of the need for contextual development. While this tends to make projects more palatable for local communities, it also limits the ambition of government agencies, by forcing them to incorporate existing structures and features of the landscape. Most utopian visions are sketched upon an empty canvas; most successful projects focus on restoring or updating an older vision. In Boston, tourists and suburbanites flock to the red-brick Faneuil Hall, and where the merchants once ran their trading empires in Quincy Market, adolescent girls now shop at the GAP. New public housing projects bear a closer resemblance to townhouses than to office towers, blending into the surrounding streets and thereby reducing the stigma attached to their residents.

Yet lost amidst all of this success are vanishing possibilities. In New York City, neither private developers nor governmental authorities are creating affordable housing for the working families of the city. There are limits to the amount of the housing stock that can be rehabilitated by non-profit organizations, or the number of units that can be built by community coalitions. The city is bulging at the seams. In Queens, untold

thousands of homes have been illegally converted to house two families. In Manhattan, the gradual advance of gentrification is forcing workers toward the outer boroughs. And then there are the neighborhoods that have been left behind by the times, as industries migrate southward or move offshore. Private initiatives may eventually resuscitate these dying enclaves, but in the interim, their decay threatens both their residents and those who live or work in the surrounding areas.

Even in a city as densely populated as New York, there still remain a few blank slates. Some are created by landfill. Others exist in rail yards or industrial districts, where businesses have packed up and moved on, leaving behind vacant warehouses and twisted rails. And one was recently cleared by a brutal attack and the ensuing conflagration. It is in these few areas, where there are no residents to displace, no buildings to preserve, and no communities to destroy, that government still dares to dream on a grand scale.

II.

heal, v.

3. *fig.* To restore (a person, etc.) from some evil condition or affection...

(Oxford English Dictionary)

We have been attacked. We have been wounded. We have been hurt. And now, we wish to be healed.

We are chasing the chimera of restoration, the vain and futile hope that we can return to the halcyon days of yore, when a painting of the Virgin Mary smeared with elephant dung was the most obscene thing in the city. We have a new awareness of

obscenity now. It is obscene to destroy thousands of lives, obscene to embrace death, obscene to murder the innocent.

Most citizens of the city, and of the country, want desperately to bandage the wounds in Lower Manhattan. They want a building that will again scrape the sky, a defiant symbol of our determination to rebuild. For it is that impulse, make no mistake, that lies at the core of the process revolving around Ground Zero. The website of the Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation is www.renewnyc.org. Those two letters, 're,' prefix every third verb applied to Lower Manhattan. They promise the return, the reconstruction, the restoration of that which was lost.

Of course, there is another competing impulse at work, the impulse to preserve. It is a graveyard, cry the families of the victims, a sacrosanct site that must not be desecrated by venial structures or mundane businesses. They, too, insist upon the impossible. Nothing, after all, is immutable. The grass at Gettysburg no longer grows long and wild. It is carefully mowed so that throngs of tourists to wander the hallowed grounds at their leisure. In New York, planners are discussing constructing a parking garage for tour buses, just below the memorial site. And all around, the city encroaches on the putative cemetery, skyscrapers casting long shadows and street vendors peddling mementos. No, we can no more hold time steady than we can turn it back.

Surely, then, Daniel Libeskind will chart our way to the future. He offers a Park of Heroes, a Wedge of Light, an Antenna Tower. The tower will stand 1776 feet tall, it will have life-affirming gardens, and below it the memorial will be shielded by a waterfall. Evocative symbols, to preserve the past, innovative architecture, to show the

way forward. So why am I haunted by nagging doubts, troubled by the gnawing sense that we have lost our way?

While the World Trade Center stood, it stood for something. It was a memorial to the overweening ambition of Austin Tobin and the unchecked power of public authorities. To most, blissfully unaware that it was owned by the state, it was a monument to the triumph of the capitalist system. But most of all, it was functional. It functioned as a source of power for the Port Authority, and later, as a source of revenue. It functioned as an office building, and as an enormous indoor shopping mall. Perhaps not every structure had an inspiring name, perhaps not every courtyard was imbued with symbolism, but they did not need to be. It was enough that they served their purpose.

What purpose will the new complex serve? It will restore, it will preserve, but those are functions of what has taken place on the site in the past. Where does its future lie? I am struck by the fact that even Daniel Libeskind, that master promoter, has not claimed any purpose for the site beyond the aesthetic and the symbolic. Did hope die at Pruitt-Igoe? Have we lost our capacity to build transformative buildings, structures that not only reflect but actually change the world around them?

Once, we were too arrogant, and wrought indiscriminate destruction in the name of progress. Now, we are too humble, and hobble ourselves in the name of preservation. I believe that there is still a need for *les grands projets*. They are the yardsticks by which we measure ourselves and our society. For visions that are innovative not only in form, but also in purpose. For dreams that are writ large upon the canvas. Perhaps Ground Zero was not the place for such dreams. But perhaps it was.