

# Regional Plan Association

## RPA Regional Assembly Keynote address

April 26, 2002

Good morning. My job right now is not to try to tell the whole story of the challenge in front of us – we have an extraordinary group of panelists who, in the second half of this session, will do that – as it is to try to outline the basic parameters, and say something about the some of the larger questions that confront us as we try and figure out what to do in this situation that has absolutely no precedent in our lives, or in the life of our city. The most important thing to say now, I think, has nothing directly to do with design and planning, although in another sense it has everything to do with them, and that is the importance of time. Whatever certain newspapers may say, the reality is that this is not the sort of process that is made better the faster we can do it. We are not in a race to prove how fast we can rebuild. We are in a struggle to figure out what kind of a city we want to be, and what kind of a city we want to show the world we are, and these are not things you can do in an instant. That does not mean, obviously, that everything connected to Lower Manhattan should be slow – so far as help for people or businesses who are in trouble, you cannot move too fast, and there is no excuse for any delay at all. But

speed is not always an asset when we think about the major decisions that will determine what will be on those sixteen acres that the entire world now calls Ground Zero, what these structures will contain and what they will look like. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have a magnitude that we cannot grasp in six weeks or six months or nine months, and long-term decisions made when we still feel the shock are not likely to be the right decisions.

If the original architecture of the World Trade Center demonstrated a great fallacy of America in the nineteen-sixties – the fallacy of size, the belief that bigger was always better, that American might and power could solve any problem – the pressure we are feeling now, I think, demonstrates the fallacy of America in the nineteen-nineties and beyond, which is the fallacy of speed, the belief that faster is always better. Faster is not better when you are trying to get beyond tragedy,

because it denies the reality of mourning, and of human nature, which is that psychological wounds take as much, if not more, time to heal than physical wounds.

All of us know that we have a superficial normalcy to life in New York now that we did not have in September or October, and that



is a good thing; if we live in the depths of tragedy we cannot accomplish much of anything else, and I think all of us take a special comfort in the pleasures of normal daily life now that we did not take before September 11<sup>th</sup>. We appreciate the profound joys of the ordinary, of walking down a city street, that we may have taken for granted before. But thinking that everything is normal does not make it so. It denies the fact that we are still, in a sense, in mourning, if no longer in total shock, and that rushing out of it, or pretending that everything is exactly normal, isn't the right way to figure out what to do downtown. We are conditioned, everywhere in this country but especially in New York, to think that the faster we move, the more we have accomplished, and that the best way we can show that we are alive – the way in which we respond to what has happened – is to do. To be active. To move. To show that they can't keep us down.

And yet almost everything that was said in the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> was wrong. Certainly Larry Silverstein's statement about rebuilding in the form of four fifty-story towers was utterly wrong, however well-intentioned it may have been. The cries to rebuild the World Trade Center exactly as it was were even more wrong, even ludicrous, though many of them, too, were well-intentioned. And in time, I suspect, we will also come to feel that the opposite demand – that we build nothing there, ever, and preserve the entire site as a memorial – is also shortsighted, however respectful its intentions. The reason is simply that it looks only backwards, only to the lives of the thousands of people lost and to their families, and it would leave us with a permanent void in the center of the city.

For a while, however, a void is exactly right. It is what we need. That is another reason I am making so much of the idea of time – because what

is right for now is not necessarily right for three or four or ten years from now. For as long as we look downtown and feel a sense of shock, of surprise, at the absence of the towers, we will know it is not yet time to build again. I do not believe that this feeling will last forever, nor should it. There will come a time when we are no longer shocked at the void, when we are not surprised that the towers aren't there, when we expect to see nothing there except a hole – and then it will be the time to build again, when Ground Zero will feel less like a place of death, and more like a construction site. For those whose families died there, this time may never come, though we cannot be sure. But I suspect that the power of the site to suggest death will fade over time, at least somewhat – sort of like a uranium half-life, it will lose its potency, in stages, though it will never disappear completely. But as that happens, we will move gradually toward thinking that there are ways in which we can respect the lives of those who died there, and at the same time respect the future of the city and build toward it, that honoring the lives lost and building anew need not be entirely incompatible.

So if we believe that – or if we believe that we are going to believe that, in time – what do we build? What are the parameters for building well, and building right? There is no road map for this one, because no city has faced exactly what we face here and now. There is nothing in our history, or the history of any other city, that tells us exactly what to do. I hope that we build ambitiously, and daringly. If we respond with the conventional, then we have failed to grasp the meaning of this moment, and the depth and resonance of its challenges. But I think there is a deep contradiction here, and we have to be honest enough to address it. We want to build a conventional neighborhood here, in part because

we want to fill this part of the city with vibrant life, embracing what we have lost, and reasserting the value of that everyday urban life that was so brutally taken away. But we also know that to make what we build too conventional, to make it too much like other places, is to deny the enormity of what happened, to deny the reality of history.

Another way to say this is to say that all of the things that we like about neighborhoods and cities, the pleasant, relaxed, traditional urbanism that makes, say, Battery Park City so appealing to so many people, are not the kinds of things that express the enormity and the power and the depth of what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>. The problem we face, in short, is that if we express the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> in its full magnitude, it is hard to imagine that we will be making a neighborhood that is as easy and comfortable to live and work in as we want it to be. But we cannot trivialize the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the lives lost, by turning the neighborhood into just a pleasant theme park, either. It is not a mall, and it is not a festival marketplace. It has to show some scars. There has to be some sense of the extraordinary. I do not believe that the greatest thing we can do

here is like perfect plastic surgery, obliterating any trace of a scar.

A lot of people feel that showing the scar and inspiring awe is the job of the memorial, and of course it is. But what I am trying to say is that we

cannot fully separate out the memorial, that even if we build for culture and commerce and transportation on other parts of the site, as we should, the whole site is still a memorial, really. Every inch of it is where the world changed in an instant, and every inch of it will always have to be considered different from other places. How we express that difference while still making a neighborhood that people will want to work and shop and learn and play in – this is our challenge. We have to make a place that simultaneously contains the wonder and beauty of the ordinary, and is different, special, and transcendent.

That is not going to be easy, especially when you consider that however much we conceptualize the entire site as having some of the qualities of a memorial, we also have to make some smaller portion of this land into a literal memorial of some kind. A great memorial is a place in which some kind of physical structure helps people connect to great historical currents, helps them feel an emotional connection to a painful, often tragic, event. It may be unpopular to say this, but it is not built solely to help people feel good, or to help them get over sadness so that they can reach the

state described in that overused word, “closure.” It should inspire awe, and make us think of the totality of what happened at least as much as of the particulars of any individual.

I should say that those of us here in this room, and others who experienced



September 11<sup>th</sup>, do not really represent the greatest challenge to the designer of a memorial, since we have our own memories to guarantee that we will have a powerful emotional response. The test of a great memorial is not its ability to evoke meaning for those who lived through what is being memorialized, but for those who did not. Its success will be determined by our unborn children and grandchildren more than by us.

I hope that whatever is done incorporates shards and pieces of steel, those façade remnants of the World Trade Center, since it is important to acknowledge the power of ruins, something American cities so rarely do, in part because our history is not so long and deep, and in part because we have so rarely had the kinds of experiences that create ruins. When we get rid of buildings, it is usually because we have decided something more profitable can be put in their place. We do not know the extraordinary way that great ruins can make connections, create awe, and inspire people with the force of authenticity and transcend a sense of time.

All of this is going to be incredibly difficult, which is why we need time. Still, I think it is important to say that this is a great moment in the history of our city – never, certainly not in our lifetimes, as there been such passionate and honest public civic dialogue about the future of the city, and about questions of urban form. Everybody is talking, and everybody seems to care. Everybody seeks engagement, and that has never happened before, certainly not to this extent. This is not a matter of people waking up and paying attention because it is some NIMBY issue about a treatment center down the street from them. This is people caring passionately about how their city will function, how it will feel, and – most importantly – how it will be symbolized. For the most part, the authorities are making it their business to listen.

The principles articulated by the Civic Alliance and New York New Visions, among other groups, have formed the basis for the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation's blueprint of basic principles, and the nature of these principles tells us that the mainstream, the center, has moved a lot in the generation since the World Trade Center was completed. Who could have imagined that almost everyone would agree that the streets that were obliterated to build the trade center's superblock should be put back? It's not a radical idea anymore, and restoring streets will go a long way toward making the city whole. Streets, by their very nature, are public space – indeed, they are the greatest and most important public space, the key building block of urbanism. To go from the anti-street private space of the World Trade Center to a renewed embrace of the street is something that returns this site, at least symbolically, to the public realm, and for that alone, it is worth it. So, too, the notion of mixed use, and of bringing cultural facilities to lower Manhattan, and depressing West Street, and of making the first priority some kind of significant transportation node tying together subways and Path trains – every one of these things is a way of using this catastrophe as an opportunity to fix something that had been broken for a long time, and it is reassuring that a consensus has developed around these ideas.

What we have to worry about as this process develops is not, then, an indifference to basic principles that have already emerged as the basis for a consensus. Indeed, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the Port Authority, which has asserted a more prominent role in the last couple of weeks, are listening so intently that I am almost tempted to say that I hope they do not listen too much, by which I mean that I hope they do not forget to exercise leadership; I hope that they do not have the illusion that consensus alone

will solve the planning problem here. We have a nice consensus, but it is only about some basic principles; it is not a program, or a process, or a design. We are still developing all three of these things, and while it is all well and good to decide that you not going to be Robert Moses, but I am not sure that you meet the challenges in front of us by being Jane Jacobs, either. You have to listen, but you cannot, in the end, treat the future of lower Manhattan as a referendum. It is not politically correct to say this, but planning is not democracy.

Finally, I spoke a moment ago about the extent to which people are thinking as never before about symbolism, about how their city is symbolized. Something was taken away from New York, and from the world, on September 11<sup>th</sup> that turns out to have been beloved by all kinds of people, more than most of us may have thought, beloved even by those who did not admire the World Trade Center as a piece of architecture – and I am speaking here not of a building but of the entirety of the skyline itself, of the skyline as an aesthetic object in itself. Nothing means more than the loss of human life on September 11<sup>th</sup>. But for many people, particularly those who were lucky enough to have been spared loss in their own families, the destruction of the skyline was itself a painful, even a devastating, thing. We are shaken by the way the skyline has been violated, devastated by its loss, and if you doubt it, look out on the sidewalk right here at Times Square, where the street vendors who might once have sold pictures of Malcolm X or John F. Kennedy are selling pictures of the twin towers – our skyscraper martyrs. I think it is worth observing that this is the first time in our history that a piece of modern architecture has been taken to embody American values, and come to stand for the life that we want to protect, as much as the Capitol and the Pentagon and the Lincoln Memorial. Modern architecture has never been

intimately tied into the identity of this country, but it is now. The terrorists have managed to do what no architect, and certainly no architecture critic, has yet been able to do, which is to make this country, this culture, cherish a piece of modern architecture and think of it as representing the national ideals.

In any event, the sense of loss of the skyline is an extraordinary thing, a shared cultural experience, made all the more marked, I think, because with the World Trade Center gone, it is not as if we got back the romantic skyline of slender towers that we had in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the great classic skyline of old. We have, instead, only a kind of boxy blur. This, perhaps, is where the bold gesture can be made – we need to restore the sky to lower Manhattan. We need to have a skyline again.

We do not need another hundred-and-ten story skyscraper, which almost nobody wants and which we cannot pay for, but there are other ways in which to build tall. I hope we can think of a great tower, perhaps a broadcast tower or an observation tower that can push up once again into the sky. It can be in itself a memorial, or a part of the memorial, and if we call it the memorial tower, that will be a far greater way to show that those people whose lives were lost will be remembered than if we leave the land vacant. We need, I believe, a twenty-first century Eiffel Tower for New York, a tower that will use the technology of our time as aggressively and inventively as Eiffel used the technology of the nineteenth century, and use it to produce a tower that I hope will be as beautiful. I can imagine that the design of such a tower would be the greatest architectural commission of our time, and it is a chance for truly great design, in part because it would not programmatically replace the World Trade Center, and would not have to meet the complex functional

demands of a complete skyscraper, but would, in its own way, repair the broken skyline, and give New York again the symbol in the sky that it craves. If we do that, and we bring equal imagination to the design problem of building a memorial on the ground, and along with both of these projects we restore the streets that are, in the end, the thing that more than any other gives New York its New York-ness – then, it is fair to say, we will have been worthy of the challenge that has been laid before us.

It is a challenge that consists of expressing the essence of this city, and then of going beyond it, and figuring out how to make New York something more than it has been before. This is, among other things, the first great urban-design problem of the twenty-first century, and it is ours. I hope, in the end, that we approach this great work by doing one thing that that is not very characteristic of New York – that we combine boldness with patience. Let us reflect, and let us think.

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