

## Some Very Fancy Wrapping Around The Same Old Thing.

I wondered, at the presentation of WTC site designs on Wednesday morning at the Winter Garden, if it would be appropriate to shout out “Play Freebird” to one of the big-name architects presenting his or her visions for the site. None of them carried a guitar onto the stage, but the atmosphere was more like a rock concert than the usual genteel planning conference, and the architects themselves more like rock stars. Their images were projected on a giant screen behind them, and the physical person of Richard Meier or Sir Norman Foster was almost lost behind the forest of cameras, microphones and scribbling hordes.

It was quite a show, and an unprecedented one. When had several hundred reporters gathered to see architecture unveiled? Not for a long time. Maybe not ever.



(L- R) “A volunteer and workshop participants Marian Imperatore (RPA), Gavin Hogben (Yale University) and Jennifer Sun (Asian Americans for Equality) contemplate a map of Lower Manhattan.”

The glitz and glamour and attention were all quite gratifying. Architecture has been historically underappreciated in the United States, especially in comparison to its more prominent role in Europe. Because of the focus on the WTC site (for tragic reasons), millions of people have become more acquainted with the novel forms of contemporary architecture, its twists and turns and unconventionality.

Still, there was a danger in these beguiling forms, because they concealed what was actually a quite unimaginative and un-ambitious agenda: rebuild and reconstitute the World Trade Center site with essentially exactly what was there before: a whole lot of office space (6 million to 10 million square feet), a whole lot of retail (1 million square feet) and a hotel. These were the marching orders for the architects, and most of the architects carried them out, even if under the skin of extravagant forms. For the most part they had packaged LMDC’s same old program in glitzy and distracting clothes. The few designs that broke the rules were the most inspiring, calling the program further into question.

Earlier the same day, on the other side of the island, a more subtle and less sexy presentation was held by RPA and the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York. It was the culmination of a five-day planning workshop, held at South Street Seaport. The presentation at PACE University was more modestly attended. There were no life-size movie screens of the presenters, and I didn’t have the urge to shout out “Freebird.” These presentations won the day on substance, however. They addressed more fundamental, and in a sense more radical, questions than those of the architects a few blocks over. These presenters did not just ask: “What should a bunch of new office space look like?” They asked, “What is the highest and best use of a whole lot of public money that

will be spent on and around the site?" They asked, "What is the best future for Lower Manhattan, and how does the WTC site fit into that?"

In a sense, they were dueling conversations. While both conversations were valuable, one was wider in scope, and preceded the other in importance.

**The context for the five-day workshop was three alternative futures** for Lower Manhattan, developed by the Economic Development Working Group of the Civic Alliance. The possible futures were based both on judgments about where the market would go, and what investments in infrastructure and amenities could shape what the market would greet with either favor or disfavor.

The professionals and civic leaders attending the workshop were separated into three groups, each working on one of the three scenarios developed through extensive work over the past year. The three scenarios were Lower Manhattan as Global Office Center; Lower Manhattan as Creative Hubs that incubate new businesses and trends of thought; and Lower Manhattan as a network of thriving Livable Neighborhoods, even if it still had extensive offices and industry.

For four and a half days, the team members had swarmed over the borrowed space at the South Street Seaport. The participants drew on big sheets of paper, tinkered with computer scenarios and typed up conclusions. There was a remarkable degree of cooperation, especially given that some of the top names in various disciplines were attending. The participants included Jane Thompson, Ken Greenberg, Robert Geddes, Cleveland Adams, Diana Balmori, Hillary Brown, Daniel Hernandez, Ethel Sheffer, Charles Zucker, Denise Scott Brown and Richard Florida.

At the end of the exercise, the three teams came up with three different visions for the Lower Manhattan and the WTC site itself. There were many complementary themes and elements, but they also showed that different visions mean different policy choices. The Global Office team invested heavily in new transportation. It also

created a model new office building, called "The Liberty Hybrid," that blended European-style access to light and air with American requirements for larger floor plates. The Creative Hubs team showed how older office building could be used to incubate new industries and uses. Under the somewhat unwieldy slogan of "radically organic incremental change," the team told how careful public investment all over Lower Manhattan could be useful. They proposed a university to kick-start all this creativity. The Livable Neighborhoods team endorsed Mayor Bloomberg's idea of creating a new "Greenwich Square," in part by decking over the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel.

"Each of these scenarios has its own set of benefits, and its own set of risks," said Chris Jones, the economic development director at RPA who helped develop the scenarios. For example, the Global Office center had the biggest payoff economically, Jones said, but also had the biggest risk because it required the heaviest investment in new infrastructure.

While the teams started with the entire district before focusing on the site, when they got there they all tended toward civic and public uses. Even the Global Office team, charged with adding 13 million square feet of office space downtown, only called for four million square feet of office space on-site.

In general, all the teams' work complemented the City's plan for the WTC site and Lower Manhattan presented last week by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The mayor had a vision for downtown.

The broader point illustrated by the three teams' work was that different visions for Lower Manhattan implied spending public money differently, both on the WTC site and in Lower Manhattan as a whole. Before LMDC assigns architects to design fancy wrappers for uses, it should consider where Lower Manhattan is going and how the WTC site fits into that vision.

**This point was all but lost when I walked west on Fulton Street**, past the big bathtub behind the fences at the WTC site and into the

Winter Garden where the presentations were being held.

Somewhat to my surprise, I was thrilled by what I saw and left invigorated by the presentations. They expanded the dialogue about form and structure so far beyond the staid forms presented by LMDC last July – and rejected by the public at Listening to the City – that they seemed to come from a different universe. Civic Alliance members should pat themselves on the back for sparking LMDC to open up the conversation as far as it has.

I particularly liked the presentation of Daniel Libeskind, the Berlin-based architect who had several radical strokes. At the same time, I appreciated the radically conventional urban design of Peterson/Littenberg.

Libeskind, who designed the new Jewish Museum in Berlin, was particularly bold in proposing to keep the slurry wall that was, as he pointed out, the only remaining element of the World Trade Center to survive the attack. These walls and the bathtub formed the spot for a public space and museum. The architecture for offices and such rose up from there, into the sky, in a series of dramatic forms.

The United Architects group, which advertised their team as the youngest and most diverse, was not lacking in hubris. It proposed one of the most outlandish ideas: “A City in the Sky” that would take its place in a series of interconnected towers, one of which would rise up to some 1800 feet high, the tallest in the world. The complex would include a “street” of retail and other activities on the 60-th floor. The forms of the building, which had giant towers leaning against one another like dancers or ladies dipping in curtsies, were great. But the project would clearly never be built.

The designs of the other teams all had noteworthy elements, although I could not muster much warmth for the cold, stark towers of Richard Meier and company. Sir Norman Foster showed how appealing a broad public park filled with people could be. The THINK team, led by Rafael Vinoly, showed two hollow, Eiffel-tower like

rectangular forms rising to the sky. These towers would be public space, and essentially decorative.

The Peterson-Littenberg team proposed re-instituting all the old streets – not only Greenwich, but Fulton, Dey, Liberty and so on – to create 16 or 17 square blocks of new streets, plazas and squares. Their plan included two tall towers, and a striking sunken amphitheater on the footprint of one of the towers.

“The essence of New York is the grid,” Peterson said, “its rectangles and its diversity. Its diversity comes from its grid, which can allow so many different things to happen from on corner to the next.” And, “the city is about making places on the street good for the people who live and work in the city.”

Herbert Muschamp of the New York Times has sneered at this approach. But I could not dismiss it so easily, even though I love contemporary architecture. Why not place bold contemporary design within a grid of tightly-defined and publicly-owned (an important point), streets and blocks? Why not respect the historic pattern of the city.

One miscellaneous observation: In general, the European or European-born – Libeskind, Foster, Vinoly – were more poised and relaxed in their presentations, even though they labored in a second language. The Americans were less eloquent. Meier in particular hemmed and hawed.

**After the “concert” at the Winter Garden,** the reporters in attendance swarmed around the architects and the table-sized physical models, as if it were the aftermath of a presidential debate and they were hungry for a quote. I joined in.

Several of the presenters surprised me by acknowledging that more office space was not necessarily the best use of the site. They had taken their orders, they said, and carried them out. Steven Peterson showed his team’s focus on traditional urban design when he told me that the architecture and the uses were essentially unimportant. The market would determine what would be built, he said.

“The thing is to put the streets, the blocks, the public spaces and infrastructure in forever,” Peterson told me. “Let people build the buildings. The uses could be any. You can’t define what is going to happen here.”

Eisenman also said the market would determine the uses, which he said condemned his competitors’ plans for ultra tall office towers, (although his team’s five towers were hardly short, at 1,111 feet.)

“I don’t think there is a marketplace for a 1700-foot tower,” Eisenman said.

The LMDC and Port Authority have adopted a fast-track schedule. It remains to be seen whether they will open up the process and the program to consideration, as they have done for consideration of forms.

The next step for the Civic Alliance might be to tackle more directly what should happen on the WTC site itself. Although the site was addressed in the planning workshop this week, they were very general in the recommendations. Ultimately, the criticism of the Civic Alliance would have more power if it comes up with several bold, alternate uses of the 16-acre site that contrasted with the more-office-space-and-retail proposed by LMDC.

--Alex Marshall, Senior Editor, RPA

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