

Museums and Urban Renewal: The Case of Lower Manhattan

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The notion that culture should be a vital part of the massive reconstruction has become central to discussions about rebuilding Lower Manhattan after the destruction of the World Trade Center. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), founded by former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and New York State Governor George Pataki to oversee the rebuilding of Ground Zero, has since its inception emphasized the use of culture as a tool for revitalization, and therefore considers culture a central part of its mission. I will look at the issue of revitalization through culture, focusing on the museum proposed as the centerpiece of the new World Trade Center (WTC). I will also discuss two other arts organizations that have submitted proposals for Ground Zero, specifically the 92nd Street Y and the New York City Opera. The issue of employing culture to resuscitate urban environments leads to the larger question of how culture is utilized as a form of civic engagement to bring economic revitalization to an area.

The community's desire to be involved in the cultural revitalization of lower Manhattan is clear, but how much of a role residents and concerned citizens will be able to play in deciding the content of the proposed museum and other cultural enterprises at Ground Zero remains to be seen. How can compromises be reached between the developers' and the citizens' desires, if and when they conflict?

Lower Manhattan is seen as an area in need of reinvigoration because it is now mainly a business district. The majority of people come to work, but – with some exceptions – not to live, eat, shop, or spend leisure time. The area lacks housing and retail enterprises, as compared to livelier areas of the city, and there are few cultural institutions that attract visitors in large numbers. Attempts have been made in the past to remedy this problem, such as those of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. But there has never before been as much interest in rekindling the area as there is now, in the wake of the destruction of September 11th. For many people, the Trade Center tragedy has created an opportunity to re-think city planning in Lower Manhattan. The goal now is to create spaces downtown that will draw more residents and visitors and thus develop a community that is active twenty-four hours a day. From the beginning, establishing locations for cultural institutions has been central to this desire.

On February 27, 2003, the LMDC announced that Daniel Libeskind's design for the rebuilding of the WTC site had been chosen. Those involved in the decision favored Libeskind's treatment of the memorial in his designs. His plans to integrate the site with the cityscape, to provide spaces for public gathering, and to make the site a cultural and commercial nexus were of particular importance to their choice. These factors underscore the relevance of culture to the reconstruction of the site.

Culture is seen as a way to bring back economic success while remaining respectful of the tragedy that occurred at the Trade Center. There is a need to effectively integrate commercial business space with memorializing space because, for developers, the real estate that comprises Ground Zero is too financially valuable to be devoted entirely to a memorial. Furthermore, there are models in which culture has been successfully used as a tool of economic renewal, including the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts.

On June 30, 2003, the LMDC issued an "Invitation to Cultural Institutions," a call for proposals from organizations in the city, including museums, for the WTC site. At the time

of this writing, a decision was scheduled but not yet announced. Libeskind's master plan includes space for a museum of 100,000-180,000 square feet. The LMDC specifies that the museum should be

... an essential element to memorialize and honor those who died. The museum should educate, inform, and inspire by telling the individual stories of the victims and the contributions of all toward the rescue, recovery and relief efforts and allow for ongoing changing programs. These events could be related within a broader social, political, or historical context.¹

The site's developers have speculated that the museum will possibly be the Museum of Freedom. This has been described as devoting the first floor to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and February 26, 1993, presenting the history of New York City on the second floor, using the third floor to explore freedom from a national perspective, and the fourth floor to explore freedom with an international scope. The Museum of Freedom project is led by Tom Bernstein, president of the Chelsea Piers recreation complex and friend of President George W. Bush. It has received much press attention, including a tentative announcement in March of 2003 that American Express will provide financial support for it.²

In July 2003, Bernstein and his consultants on the project attended the annual meeting of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience to gather information for the planning of the Museum. Reactions to the Museum of Freedom project from the members of the Coalition were mixed. Some shied away from the Museum's focus on the United States, noting that the September 11th tragedy was an attack on freedom everywhere.³

Reactions from the American public have also been mixed. In light of the current political climate in the United States, the title of the Museum itself has many responding negatively. Some feel that a memorial is enough, and a museum not needed. Others would prefer that the focus of the museum be broader, and not just historical. For example, Community Board 1, which serves Lower Manhattan, has expressed a desire for the museum to include art.⁴ Taking into consideration its politically conservative sponsorship, will the Museum of Freedom address relations between the United States and the rest of the world in more than a merely superficial manner? If the museum at Ground Zero is supposed to be a tool of civic engagement, how can it effectively engage the public without ignoring or alienating sectors of it?

Despite the attention the Museum of Freedom idea has attracted from the press and the LMDC, it has not definitely been chosen, and there are numerous other museums that have submitted projects for the World Trade Center site. The New York Historical Society and the Museum of the City of New York, along with seven other institutions, including the Smithsonian, have submitted a joint proposal to the LMDC. It is possible that the Museum of Freedom could be built in conjunction with a group of museums such as this one. Whatever its content, the museum will need to welcome the public into a space that is difficult for many to visit. It will help set the tone of the memorial, and provide mediation between the memorial and other spaces in the complex, both cultural and commercial.

Two other cultural organizations that have proposed spaces at the Trade Center site are the New York City Opera and the 92nd St. Y. While initial talks between City Opera, which wants to leave its current home at Lincoln Center, and the LMDC seemed promising, community members rated their desire to have an opera company at the site as very low. It

seems that residents are more interested in an institution that can draw crowds of all ages and serve more community needs. The Lower Manhattan community has responded positively to a possible branch of the 92nd St. Y at the site because it can provide programming for all ages and draw visitors both day and night.

Using culture to achieve more community involvement is a worthy goal, one with roots in less mainstream institutions such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The importance of community engagement in building cultural centers at the World Trade Center site is a clearly espoused objective, but for whose ends is it being promoted? What does it mean that a high profile project like the rebuilding of the World Trade Center is using this tactic? In a case with this much press attention, and of such high importance, how will residents truly be able to have their needs met? Aiming to revitalize Lower Manhattan with cultural organizations is a laudable objective, but it will only be successful if the developers of the site are truly devoted to it and if all involved can work out compromises that effectively meet everyone's needs.

¹ John C. Whitehead and Kevin M. Rampe, "Invitation to Cultural Institutions for the World Trade Center Site," New York: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, June 30, 2003.

² Robin Pogrebin, "Plans for Cultural Complex at Ground Zero Take Form," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2003, late edition, p. E3.

³ Philip Nobel, "The New Ground Zero: The Downtown Culture Derby Begins..." *The New York Times*, August 31, 2003, late edition, p. E1.

⁴ Web site of Community Board #1, <http://www.cb1.org/>, accessed 12/03.