

# Australian Arts Review

## WTC Competition Review for Australian Art Review

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“The tragic demands death, the event from which there is no going back. But it is not simply the fact of death, but its impact in a defined poetic context.”<sup>i</sup>

And so it is with the events of September 11. For, while a decade of US sanctions against Iraq has led to the deaths of over a million innocent men, women and children<sup>ii</sup>; while every year, almost 500,000 people die of influenza and a staggering 3 million people of malaria; and while on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, 35,615 people died of starvation<sup>iii</sup> - our largest response is reserved for this, more poetic event, which, cruel as it may sound, is relatively insignificant in terms of human loss. One of the greatest pieces of archi-cinema ever – climaxing in the image of the second plane careering into the tower - has generated the most anticipated and publicized architectural competition in recent history.

However, the political issues surrounding the cause of September 11 and the subsequent retributions inflicted by the US on ‘enemies’ in both their own country and on foreign soil has provided anything but an appropriate foundation for the task of rebuilding at Ground Zero. In this competition for replacement towers, the ethical minefield so familiar to architects – where patronage and opportunity rarely appear in ideal combinations – has reached an entirely new level of complexity.

The design of commercial office towers is an area where this conflict is often at its greatest. An early master of the type, Mies van der Rohe, is famous for a singular dedication to his craft, bypassing the need to address ethical issues. It has been argued that Mies would have gladly worked for Hitler, had the Fuhrer evinced a taste for modernism.<sup>iv</sup> But now we are faced, not with a singular case, but a very public show by a group of the world’s best architects discarding their ethics and principles *en masse* in the rush toward the job of a lifetime.

The unprecedented scale of the events of September 11 has ignited a similar level of architectural megalomania. Computer renderings of improbably large foyers feature American flags hanging Nazi-style, underpinning massive new towers in a glorification of the only political and economic system ever to be condemned for acts of international terrorism by the UN.<sup>v</sup> To even propose new buildings on this site - let alone in this all-powerful proto-

fascist imagery – and at a time when the fallout from US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq cannot be comprehended - is beyond belief. Yet, this megalomania has been shrouded in all manner of rhetorical justifications on the part of the competing architects. The THINK team (responsible for the Nazi-style stars and stripes installation) claimed a “moral obligation in rebuilding Ground Zero”<sup>vi</sup> while Foster and Partners cited “a duty to symbolize the rebirth of New York on the skyline, to demonstrate to the world the resilience, the resolve, the strength and faith in the future of all those who are dedicated to liberty and freedom”.<sup>vii</sup> Neither the rhetoric nor the design proposals presented address the real complexity of the situation and thus fail in their central task – the interpretation of these events for all spectrums of society affected by the disaster. It is telling that a rhetorical parallel for these architectural justifications would be the diatribes of a righteous George W. Bush as he announces yet another invasion of a third-world country.

Artists have not escaped this tendency, resorting to similar displays of heroism even without a brief for new towers on the site. A team of artists and arts organisations<sup>viii</sup> responded soon after the tragedy with a proposal for two columns of light formed by a massive array of searchlights arranged at the perimeter of the towers’ footprint. While the work is on a scale many times larger than the Nuremberg imagery that it recalls, the blunt, singular gesture was devoid of the sophistication, layering and elegance of Riefenstahl and Speer’s efforts. The twin columns of light presented a decidedly over-inflated gesture in memorial terms, but were eerily appropriate given the characteristics displayed by President Bush and his regime as it marches toward a realisation of the sci-fi horror of a single, highly militarised state controlling the planet.

The selection of Daniel Libeskind’s scheme then, is particularly ironic given that it was he who demonstrated in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, what could be achieved after an appropriate passage of time and with the arrival of a political and social landscape that could properly address the memory and commemoration of these issues. However, Libeskind’s rebirth as a New-Yorker – proclaimed on Oprah, in the style pages of *Time* magazine and anywhere else where he could get an audience<sup>ix</sup> - has debased his hard-won authority to the point that this project (if it actually proceeds) may be the ruin of his career and will certainly cast a shadow of doubt over his previous achievements. Libeskind has, in both his participation in the competition and his proposal, demonstrated that not even he, the master of the tragic, has the perspective nor the courage to address the issues at this site at this time.

There can be no possible excuse for the participation in the Ground Zero competition while the true effects of the event cannot yet be fully registered or understood. Only the most basic, direct response to the human tragedy – a memorial to the dead – could fulfil any meaningful role as a response at this time to the events of September 11. Loos was right it seems. To seek the tragic in modern architecture, we have to return to the tomb and the monument.<sup>x</sup>

Slavoj Zizek noted in an essay written soon after September 11 that, “to succumb to the urge to act now and retaliate means precisely to avoid confronting the true dimensions of what occurred on September 11”.<sup>xi</sup> In an ideal culture, artists and architects would, unlike George Dubya, resist this urge.

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<sup>i</sup> Patterson, Richard, ed; *AD 76: The Tragic in Architecture*, p9

<sup>ii</sup> Chomsky, Noam *September 11*, Allen and Unwin, p 44

<sup>iii</sup> [www.starvation.net](http://www.starvation.net)

<sup>iv</sup> Hochman, Elaine S; *Architects of Fortune*.

<sup>v</sup> Chomsky, Noam, *ibid*, p 73

<sup>vi</sup> LMDC website “LowerManhattan.info”

<sup>vii</sup> LMDC website “LowerManhattan.info”

<sup>viii</sup> The project, “A Tribute in Light”, was a joint initiative by John Bennett, Gustavo Bonevardi, Julian LaVerdiere, Paul Marantz, Paul Myoda and Richard Nash-Gould and was supported by the Municipal Art Society and Creative Time.

<sup>ix</sup> Iovine, Julie V.; *Finalists for Ground Zero Pull Out the Stops*; New York Times, Feb 26, 2003.

<sup>x</sup> Patterson, Richard, ed; *ibid*, p9

<sup>xi</sup> Zizek, Slavoj; *Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!*, Verso, London, 2002