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REBUILDING GROUND ZERO

WORLD TRADE CENTER COMPETITION, NEW YORK

OPINION: GERARD REINMUTH

"America should learn to humbly accept its own vulnerability as part of this world, enacting the punishment of those responsible as a sad duty, not as an exhilarating retaliation." [i]

WRITING A MEASURED response to the architectural competition at the World Trade Center site from within the shadow cast by the US invasion of Iraq is a difficult task. The situation in Iraq is a poignant reminder of how the tragedy of September 11 has changed the global political landscape, where a universal outpouring of sympathy towards a wounded America has been capitalised upon by the Bush administration as it continues to expand upon the very US policies that, as many have argued, were the cause of the attack on the twin towers.

For, while the events in New York were indeed a tragedy of some significance, can it compare to the US bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceuticals plant in 1998 – just one of many examples of US-led terrorism [ii] – which eliminated the primary means of medicine production in Sudan, resulting in the death of tens of thousands of innocent civilians? Alternately, we could make comparisons with the decade of US-driven sanctions against Iraq that has led to the deaths of a million innocent civilians and another half-a-million

children [iii] or with the fact that, on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, 35,615 people died of starvation [iv]. However, recognition of these events is disadvantaged when compared to the focus for September 11 provided by the extraordinary spectacle of the towers' collapse.

These issues appear to be far from the minds of respondents to the Ground Zero competition. The image of the second plane careering into the tower – undoubtedly one of the greatest moments of archi-cinema ever – ignited a high level of architectural megalomania among the participants, a megalomania shrouded in all manner of justifications for taking part in the process. The THINK team (Vinoly, Schwartz et al) claimed a "moral obligation in rebuilding Ground Zero" [v] to justify their participation while Foster and Partners cited "a duty to symbolise 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" [vi]. That a rhetorical parallel of these architectural justifications would be the diatribe of a righteous George W Bush as he announces yet another invasion of a third-world country is telling.

Uncritical coverage given to the competition by a parasitic architectural (and news) media has been equally contemptuous. As for the architects themselves,



Memory Foundations: World Trade Center Design Study
01 View, Sept 11th Place (© archimation)
02 View, West Street (© archimation)
03 Wedge of Light (© Studio Daniel Libeskind)

Project credits: Daniel Libeskind, Architect (Studio Daniel Libeskind) with Gary Hack, Urban Planner, Hargreaves Associates, Landscape Architect, Jeff Zupan, Traffic Engineer

we have seen leaders of the profession abandon the levels of intelligence and insight upon which they have established their authority and discard their ethics en masse in the rush toward the job of a lifetime. The blatant heroism exhibited in the proposals (and the level to which architects would go in an attempt to win the project[vii]) is grossly out of step with the sensitivity required to treat the issue and finds equivalence only with the spectacle of the event itself – thus becoming simply another chapter in that event as opposed to a critical response to it. However, there is little glamour in designing food-distribution centres for victims of starvation when compared to the life of say, Frederic Schwartz (THINK), who made regular appearances on *New York Tonight*[viii] (among other media appearances in the lead-up to the decision) as an attempt to win support for his particular conglomeration of towers. Schwartz, like Libeskind and other competitors who fought to the death via cable-TV, *Oprah*, and other media avenues, have lowered the reputation of their profession. There can be no possible excuse for the consideration of new towers on this site while the US continues upon a path of retributions that has appalled commentators everywhere. The selection of Libeskind's scheme is particularly ironic given that it was he who showed us – via the Jewish Museum – what could be achieved with the perspective offered by time (50 years after the event, in

that case) and with the arrival of a political and social landscape that could properly address the memory and commemoration of these events.

Frank Gehry appeared to be on the right track, rejecting the invitation to enter but then commercialising his response with the qualifier that his refusal to participate was due to the insulting[ix] \$40,000 fee. Meanwhile, Libeskind's rebirth as a New Yorker has debased his hard-won authority and integrity to the point that this project – if it proceeds – may be the ruin of his career and 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 has the perspective or courage to address the issues at this time, his shadowless buildings casting light on the memories of the 3000 dead while simultaneously glorifying the only political and economic system ever to be condemned for acts of international terrorism by the UN[x].

If there is one enduring aspect of this tragedy it was that many of us paused to reflect on the current geopolitical landscape, why this landscape contributed to these events and how its adjustment might avert further disasters in the future. Implicit in this reflection is the need to pause and consider how and when the possibility of any new building at the site should be approached. An example exists for me in the case of a church in Hamburg that I passed on a daily

basis in the early 90s. Bombed in World War II, it still stood in its ruined state, a refusal by that city to fully heal the scars of war – a commemoration of the event itself and a warning against taking that path in the future.

Until the commemorative needs of New Yorkers and the programmatic needs of a new building at the site are understood, this is what should happen at Ground Zero.

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^v Zizek, Slavoj, Welcome To The Desert Of The Real II Reflections on WTC
ⁱⁱ Chomsky, Noam September 11, Allen and Unwin, p 48
ⁱⁱⁱ Chomsky, Noam, *ibid*, p44
^{iv} Elsis, Mark, www.starvation.net
^v LMDC website "LowerManhattan.info"
^{vi} LMDC website "LowerManhattan.info"
^{vii} Julie V. Iovine, "Finalists for Ground Zero pull out all the stops", *New York Times*, February 26, 2003.
^{viii} Julie V. Iovine, *ibid*
^{ix} Deyan Sudjic in "The Guardian", Saturday, February 01, 2003
^x Chomsky, Noam, *ibid*, p 73

