Building Consensus from Ground Zero

With the one-year anniversary of September 11 approaching, the process to rebuild at Ground Zero has begun in earnest. At the center of the negotiations is urban-planning professor Alexander Garvin ('61), who in February was named vice president for planning, design, and development of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), the group appointed to coordinate the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site and its surroundings.

In New York City on July 20, the LMDC sponsored "Listening to the City," a meeting to review the initial round of schemes for rebuilding Lower Manhattan. It was one of the most unusual events in the history of urban planning. Forty-five hundred New Yorkers attended the "Town Meeting for the 21st Century," as it was billed, in which participants were polled electronically about the site's development, and the results were displayed and discussed in real time. Although the event was well received by the participants, it underscored many of the difficulties facing the city in the coming months. It raised tantalizing questions about just how the process will lead to great design.

Criticism of the LMDC has been circulating since its inception, when New York governor Pataki and city mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg appointed 12 board members, nearly all of whom have backgrounds in the financial industry as well as deep connections to the two administrations (the development schemes can be viewed at www.lmdc.org). Critics pointed out the lack of representation from neighborhood groups, victims' families, survivors, minority communities, and the design community, who were relegated to roles in nine "advisory groups." (An exception, it should be noted, is Billie Tsien, of Tod Williams Billie Tsien & Associates, and recently Louis I. Kahn Professor of Architecture at Yale.)

The board's starchiness reflects the economic and political sensitivity of the site to the governor and mayor, due not only to its revenue-generating potential but also to the powerful interests that control it. The site is owned by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which both states control and must raise its own revenue. Last summer, just before the attacks, the Port Authority leased the site for 99 years to Silverstein Properties, a real estate developer, and Westfield America, an international retail developer, for $120 million a year. Although the buildings are gone and the lessees are receiving billions in insurance payments, they still have a legal say in what gets built. As the Port Authority's chief engineer Frank Lombardi bluntly put it, "The site is not a blank slate."

Indeed. On the morning of July 16, four days before "Listening to the City," the initial six schemes were released to the public at a press conference at Federal Hall. By the afternoon the city had responded with a polite, but unanimous, thumbs down. The schemes were developed by the large New York firm Beyer, Blinder, Belle, the winner of an RFP process to master-plan the site, but it was clear that each reflected the financial requirements of the Port Authority and the leaseholders. All six included 11,000 square feet of office space, an amount equal to that lost, and one million square feet of new retail and hotel space, more than existed previously. The schemes also set aside land for a memorial and new cultural institutions, of course, but in the flashing images shown on the nightly news, it was the banal office towers crowding each scheme that New Yorkers saw and responded to. Where was the soaring memorial to the victims? Where was the visionary architecture?

Unfair questions to ask of a preliminary set of master plans, perhaps, because the buildings are merely massing models, but the Port Authority, the LMDC, and their designers made their own bed. Maybe they misread the public's mood, or maybe they couldn't find a subtle way to deal with the commercial interests on the site. Whatever the case, giving office and retail development equal time and space to the memorial—if not in substance, at least in the way the six schemes were presented—was, at best, politically insensitive. For his part, Garvin said, "We accepted the Port Authority's program. It was easy to predict that it would not be popular to remove half the site from development and erect the same program on half the site."

And so it was that 4,500 concerned citizens accepted the LMDC's invitation to discuss the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan. The scene was a room at the Javits Center, New York's enormous space-frame convention hall, whose high-tech aesthetic and inhuman scale remind one, ironically, of the World Trade Center turned on its side. The room was a field of five hundred round tables of ten, each with a laptop, ten keypads, and a professional "facilitator" from AmericaSpeaks, a non-profit company that bills itself as "a neutral convener of public participation forums." At the center was a stage, usually held by the lead facilitator, a sort of master of ceremonies who introduced speakers, read questions, and explained the polling process, always with solemn reference to "the events of September 11" and "the power of democracy." Suspended over the crowd were eight giant screens, showing the speakers and posting the data that participants entered on their keypads and laptops. On the perimeter bustled the press and the public-relations people, taping interviews and answering phones.

The data entered by the participants was received by the AmericaSpeaks "Theme Team," who then posted it on the screens in the form of charts, graphs, and bulleted points. Some data was numerical, but some was anecdotal. Participants were asked, for example, to discuss their "hopes and concerns" for Ground Zero, and then to create a short list of "themes" and type them into their laptop. The lists were sent to the Theme Team, who culled them for consensus, reducing them to a few points that could be shown in the space of a PowerPoint slide.

If this is democracy then a shopping mall is a public space, even if AmericaSpeaks does its best to ensure "neutrality." In democracy, the citizens grant power to their leaders; in this process it is the leaders, appointed by those in power, who granted a voice to the people. They could have just as easily taken it away. On a more ephemeral level, the process exhibited a troubling corporate aesthetic: suits, boardrooms, PowerPoint presentations, focus groups, press conferences, speeches, spin. None of this is inherently bad, of course, but it would be naïve not to notice the aesthetic correspondence between the schemes and the process. In such an emotional situation, and with reports of corporate malfeasance on every front page, we might ask, is this what we want?

Despite this, the meeting appeared to be an earnest attempt by the LMDC to include the public's desires in the process. One sign of this was the sophistication of the schemes' presentations, which included maps of the neighborhood, existing conditions, land use, and infrastructure. Paul Goldberger (Yale College '72), architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, was moved to call it "the biggest urban-planning class in history." Another sign of the LMDC's good intentions is the back-to-the-drawing-board attitude they have taken since the meeting, pushing back the deadline on the next round of schemes to absorb the public's "hopes and concerns," and even hinting at a change in the program to allow for less office space on the site and a different type of architectural qualifications.

To the participants' credit, they saw beyond the wall of commercial high-rises to the plans' more subtle aspects, and real, positive consensus was reached about certain elements. It was agreed, for example, that it would be desirable to sink underground all or some of West Street, the wide, busy throughway on the western edge of the site that has always acted as a barrier between the waterfront and the rest of Lower Manhattan. Further, that a "memorial promenade" should be built over it, visually connecting the Statue of Liberty with Ground Zero. The participants also liked the idea of reintroducing the Manhattan street grid to the site, which was removed when the Trade Center was built in the 1960s. And finally, the recommendation that received the loudest, most defiant applause: restore the skyline with a tall, symbolic building.

But where to go from here? How does design arise from this sort of political process, in which so many people have input and so many factions, many with little care for good design, have an interest in the outcome? "This is not architecture," Garvin said at the meeting, meaning that this is planning, a field of design that can account for politics. "The process has just started. You can expect many other designs to be put forward and other designers to be involved before we arrive at the final program and site plan for the property. You can also expect a much broader set of planning issues to be presented." It should be an interesting fall.

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"Listening to the City," Jacob Javits Center, July 20, 2002. Photograph by Ted Whitten