



Courtesy: Photo: David H. M. / iStockphoto.com

One symbol to heal them all: A rendering of Daniel Libeskind's competition-winning Freedom Tower shows how his design echoes the country's most famous icon of freedom, the Statue of Liberty.

## Democracy and Design

*Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*  
by Paul Goldberger. Published by  
Random House, 2004. 274 pp., \$24.95

Reviewed by Terrence Doody

Eric Darnton wrote *Divided We Stand: A Biography of New York's World Trade Center* after the first terrorist attack there on February 20, 1993. The Japanese architect Minuro Yamasaki (who also designed the infamous Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis) designed the WTC, and his remorseless minimalism was never seen as an improvement over the old neighborhood the complex displaced. Yamasaki's design, Darnton wrote, had a "chilling perfection," and he drew this cold-eyed correlation between the architect and the terrorists:

"This analogy between those who seek to destroy the structures [the architect] thought it rational and desirable to build becomes possible by shift-

ing focus momentarily to the shared, underlying predicates of their acts. To attempt creation or destruction on such an immense scale requires both bombers and master builders to view living processes in general, and social life in particular, with a high degree of abstraction. Both must undertake a radical distancing of themselves from the flesh-and-blood experience of mundane existence 'on the ground.'"

Paul Goldberger's *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York* is an account of the early stages of the planning to rebuild the World Trade Center after the attacks of September 11, 2001. In it, the architects are the good guys, but they are by no means the only ones. Everyone wanted to do the right thing, but no one knew what that was. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani wanted to dedicate the entire site to a memorial; the developer Larry Silverstein, who had just purchased the lease, wanted to rebuild immediately—a gesture of

defiance, he said, that was interpreted as greed and denial; and the heads of the Port Authority, which owns the property, wanted to ensure its future profitability. The survivors of the attacks wanted their say, too, as did the families of the victims, the living confederates of the dead rescue workers, the tenants of the office complex, the inhabitants of the neighborhoods like Tribeca that had finally grown up around the WTC, engaged citizens from all over the city, urbanologists from inside the academy as well as off the streets—all in addition to the architects.

And all of them did get their say, because although there was no one quite in charge, there were meetings, forums, organized discussions, and competitions, sponsored by various newspapers, magazines, and public entities, which were inclusive of an unprecedented number of people. Goldberger's phrase "the rebuilding of New York" is a pardonable hyperbole; closer to the truth, perhaps, is the rebuilding by New York—and

interested parties. When he claims the project was "to carry a symbolic weight far greater than that of any other building project of our time," he is stating his theme and staking his claim: Because of the "complex politics and...widespread sense of passion" that marks this project, it has become "the most challenging urban-design problem of the twenty-first century."

Goldberger's narrative consists of three woven threads. First is the account of the struggle for control among politicians, developers, and governmental agencies—this is the power-and-money story, in which the names of the players likely will be unfamiliar to non-natives. Second is the story of the architectural competitions, in which the names of the star architects—eventual winner Daniel Libeskind, Norman Foster, Rafael Viñoly, Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey, Peter Eisenman, Steven Holl, David Childs of SOM, among others—are more widely known; their differences more visible,

more open to viewers at a distance. Third is the story of the relationship of everyone else to these first two groups—it is the messiest, the most unexpected, and the most hopeful story. “Everybody else” refers to the experts in “living processes” and social considerations that political exigency, profit taking, planning-from-on-high, and sacred and secular theories tend to ignore. Public outcries made two major competitions necessary, because “everybody” objected to the results of the first. Goldberger frames this third thread as the triumph of the spirit of Jane Jacobs over the ghost of Robert Moses. All of it ends still in media res, with a great deal left to negotiate and do, but on a note more optimistic than not: “Idealism met cynicism at Ground Zero, and so far they have battled to a draw.”

But there are a couple of other lessons, too. The first is that the democratic process itself is not necessarily conducive to good design. The Washington Monument and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial were not developed in committee. “Everybody else’s” passionate ideas and requirements are not created equal. The second lesson is that it is still far easier to design a good building than to realize an adequate symbol. Not only do symbols comprehend and resolve conflicting desires and intentions, but their meanings evolve over time.

Because the World Trade Center was never the financial or social success that the Rockefeller interests intended it to be, its second iteration—in addition to everything else—must be redemptive.

Goldberger likes Libeskind’s winning design very much, but he argues that one of the reasons it won was because Libeskind was so eloquent in explaining his design’s meaning. Not what it does mean, but what it would mean, in language more spiritual than architectural. The last photograph in the book is a wonderful rendering of Libeskind’s Freedom Tower from an angle that holds the Statue of Liberty in the foreground. The design by itself is a somewhat angular abstraction, but in this context it is an obvious and beautiful allusion to one of our most powerful national icons.

The 21st century is, we have to realize, only five years old. Other cities—Bombay, for instance—present some formidable challenges to urbanologists of every stripe. The many opinions, the chaotic forums and contests, the egos and in-fighting, all together may not guarantee a good design, but they do oppose the imperious abstractions and life-denying laws that are often a part of urban planning and always a part of war. The fight to make the new World Trade Center ennobling and useful is a good one. ■

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