

POST SCRIPTUM

Memories, Ghosts, and Scars: Architecture and Trauma in New York and Hiroshima

SUNIL BALD

January 16, 2011

It is now exactly nine years since this article was written and, naturally, a lot has happened. The story of the development, or delayed development, of the World Trade Center is well documented, and one could argue that the knee-jerk reactions of the architectural community outlined in the article proved quite prophetic. We will get a tower bigger than before. We will get a memorial with the names of victims in an environment of clean, modernist abstraction. And we will get a mass of neutral speculative office space.

While we may be getting the predicted formulaic architectural response, the local, national, and global contexts surrounding the project have completely altered. New York City's economy is in a severe recession that has decimated the market for office space, especially in downtown Manhattan. For the national psyche, after years of conflating the 9/11 events with the Iraq War, the country now seems ready to forget the tragedies of past decisions and past events. And relative to the global architectural scene, the ambitious commercial and cultural developments in China and the Emirates make the 9/11 complex neither as unique, nor as tall, nor as grand as hoped.

Architecture can never be considered as static and immutable in either presence or meaning. Rather, like the 9/11 events themselves, there is a need to recognize the intricate relationship between object and context. The project in Lower Manhattan has placed enormous faith in its own ability to project strength

through an architectural monologue, whether it be about musculature or reflection, a monologue that limits possibilities for reimagining.

The most recent opportunity for dialogue, to build an Islamic cultural and recreation center near the site, has been heatedly debated. Even President Obama has been ambivalent in his support for the project, preferring another site “out of shouting distance” from Lower Manhattan. Here, Mayor Bloomberg has shown moral and intellectual courage in his support by realizing a reimagining of the site might begin to be accomplished by embracing the existing multiculturalism of the city, acknowledging the city as a dynamic force that adapts to changing social and cultural contexts. Though a modest proposal, the Islamic center has unintentionally challenged the validity of the 9/11 complex’s scale and program by demonstrating that perhaps the most powerful monument in Lower Manhattan and to the events of 9/11 is the malleability of the city itself.