



Planning, Politics and the Public at Ground Zero

**A Statement from
 NY Metro Chapter American Planning Association
 New York New Visions
 Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York
 Labor Community Advocacy Network**

The sad and growing disarray at Ground Zero has recently been cited on the front pages and on the nightly news. New Yorkers, as well as people across the nation, and overseas, are beginning to protest the apparent stasis and politicization of planning efforts and decision making. The question of who is—and who should be—in control of key decisions at this most sacred and significant of sites contributes to the lack of progress and the sense that things are not headed in the right direction.

It is clear now that the enormity of the events of 9/11 and their aftermath require more time and effort to overcome than anyone has been willing to acknowledge. No matter how comprehensive and inclusive the planning process, the public interest cannot be served as long as politics, instead of sound planning principles, drive the process.

The NY Metro Chapter of the APA, New York New Visions and the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York continue to support the goal of re-establishing the WTC site as a locus for office and retail use, cultural and civic space, as well as the all-important memorial. However, so long as there is the development goal of cramming ten million square feet of publicly-subsidized commercial and retail space onto a small site with space given to the memorial, there will be conflicts and serious questions about the capacity of the site to absorb such uses.

We have seen a process that has been flawed almost from the beginning. The shortcomings can be grouped as those of plan and of process and include the following:

- The Port Authority's ownership of the land and the terms of its lease with a private developer, which have dominated a more objective consideration of what should be done on the site;
- The lack of real working coordination between State and City governments, and among a multitude of governmental agencies.

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These have exacerbated jurisdictional divisions between the World Trade Center site and lower Manhattan context, including streets, transit, and commercial and residential development;

- A public input process that while comprehensive in theory, left various constituencies with the sense that they were unimportant, ignored, or pitted against other groups.
- The lack of clarity in recognizing the inherent tensions between planning an emotionally important memorial and planning for a redevelopment site in lower Manhattan;
- The confusion created by substituting individual building architecture for site planning—particularly in how this continually modified the Libeskind Master Plan, which is a long-term conceptual blueprint for development;
- The unwillingness of the supervising agencies to issue overall design guidelines to govern building development and to relate the open space to buildings;
- The lack of real planning integration between the site and its surrounding neighborhood;
- The assumption that the presence of cultural institutions would serve as a “buffer” between the memorial and commercial precincts, without clarity as to what the cultural uses might mean in actual practice. This resulted in challenges to freedom of expression and long term uncertainty about support for such institutions.

From the beginning, the civic leadership of New York and the public have stated that New York City and its planning agencies should have a preeminent role in deciding the future of this site and all of lower Manhattan. The historical fact that the site is owned by the Port Authority must not override the City’s fundamental responsibility to engage in a comprehensive planning and rebuilding process. The City’s elected officials should be accountable for such a process, and Governor Pataki’s repeated intervention, and sometimes overriding action, need to be converted into a truer and responsible collaboration. We therefore welcome the Mayor’s recent assertion that the program for the site, ten million square feet of office space, and the terms of the lease all require reconsideration. The City should play a bigger role in the rebuilding process, whoever wins the election.

The competition for a memorial design occurred quite apart from any integrated planning process for the site and its surroundings. The cultural uses, as a buffer between memorial and retail uses, as asserted in the original blueprint, may have resulted in a misunderstanding about the character and function of the cultural uses being planned. The Libeskind Master Plan, embraced by all, was never based upon the objective market analysis and community participation that are the basis of a comprehensive plan.

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The process can get back on track by

- **revisiting the overall program and lease terms;**
- **incorporating interim uses and short-term implementation of design improvements as well as long term goals;**
- **seriously considering the Mayor’s recommendation for residential and institutional uses for portions of the site and in the immediately surrounding area;**
- **providing direct public vehicular streets and pedestrian links that connect the site with its surroundings;**
- **revisiting “security” decisions that can or will negatively affect streetscape design and public access and creatively incorporating needed security features without compromising the need for a lively and accessible public realm surrounding the site;**
- **creating a clear, transparent and speedy public process based on NYC procedures that involves all stakeholders and that seeks consensus, rather than allowing interest group vetoes.**

As members of civic groups and as citizens of New York, we believe that an effective political and public planning process can and must occur on this site. We also believe that public and private investment can work together so long as public goals lead the way.

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