

English texts

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Ground Zero: the facts and the story. New York Port Authority and World Trade Center. 11 September 2001. Bankers, politicians, clients and architects. Daniel Libeskind vs SOM. The future of Ground Zero

Though empires are not built in a day, their existence may come to light in a single moment as a result of a proclamation, the signing of a treaty, law or decree, as in the case of the "Empire of the Hudson". On 23 August 1921, in fact, the President of the United States, Warren Harding, signed a resolution that permitted the states of New York and New Jersey to form the Port of New York Authority. From that time on the Port Authority, later revised to become the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, has played a decisive role in orienting and governing the development of New York, and since the 1930s its institutional architecture has been a model. Through crises and transformations, bitter conflicts and hard-fought legislative battles, its powers have been extended along with its fields of influence. In parallel, its political weight has increased. The economic resources it administers have grown. Already in 1960 the funds available to the Port Authority amounted to many millions of dollars. Since the previous decade David Rockefeller and the main exponents of the New York financial community, behind the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, had been debating what initiatives to take to revitalize the activities of the Downtown areas. From 1958, on the eve of the appointment of Nelson Rockefeller, David's brother, as Governor of the State of New York, to 1960, the idea had emerged of building a World Trade and Financial Center in Lower Manhattan, facing the East River. Given the forecasts regarding costs, the location of the complex and the convergence of interests, it was only natural that the forces behind the project would work in collaboration with the Port Authority. The Authority's statutes, however, stipulated that it could not proceed with the acquisition of property, the financing or the construction of buildings for offices or to contain services connected with financial activities. Nevertheless, one of its tasks was to promote every type of initiative that would help in the development of trade. Making use of this contradiction, a telling one that permits us to glimpse how much the economic and institutional framework in which the authority operated had changed in a period of forty years, in 1961 the Port Authority released a document that demonstrated how the construction of the new Trade Center would be consis-

tent with its objectives and its mission. Moreover, the Port Authority claimed, the investment required for the construction of the complex, conceived to enormously favor the coordination of commercial activities on a worldwide scale, once it had reached the point of economic balance, would generate such marginal profits that only «a public agency» would be capable of undertaking the project. The cost forecast was 355 million dollars, considered sufficient to finance the construction of a number of towers with heights varying from 30 to 72 storeys, on the East Side of Manhattan, south of the Brooklyn Bridge. As we have seen, the Port Authority depends on two States, New York and New Jersey, and these two states are separated not only by the Hudson River, but also by diverging interests. At the start of the Sixties, New Jersey didn't have many reasons to be interested in resolving the problems of Downtown Manhattan. Ensuring the functioning of the Hudson and Manhattan Railroad, the decrepit rail line that permitted 140,000 commuters to reach Manhattan from New Jersey every day, on the other hand, was a priority for the administrators in Trenton. New York, instead, thought the time had come to build the World Trade Center. The mediation, leading to a rather extensive interpretation of the tasks entrusted to the agency, came from Albany, the capital of New York State. In April 1961 Governor Rockefeller signed a decree giving the Port Authority the task of ensuring the functioning of the rail line, to satisfy New Jersey, as well as that of building the World Trade Center. All this was approved by a single piece of legislation, and as a result the Port Authority, while it formed the PATH in 1962 (Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation) to manage the rail transport, decided to build the new complex not on the East River but on the opposite side of Manhattan, facing the Hudson. In 1964 Austin Tobin, director of the Port Authority since 1942, was ready to present the project for the World Trade Center. Tobin was a forceful and extraordinarily influential person; he had systematically extended the power and range of action of the agency, where he had first begun working in 1927 and remained until 1972; in the 1940s he had guided the Port Authority, already owner of bridges, tunnels, terminals and piers, in the conquest of the Newark, La Guardia, Teterboro and Idlewild (now J.F. Kennedy) airports; during the course of this campaign he had overcome the resistance of Robert Moses, another long-term, powerful administrator, who from the early 1930s to 1968 had conceived and managed all the public works that reshaped New

York. The investment planned by the Port Authority for the construction of the World Trade Center was 522 million dollars, but this figure was to triple before the conclusion of the work. «Twin towers of gleaming metal, 110 floors high» had been designed to surpass the record still held by the Empire State Building and to respond to what Nelson Rockefeller had requested: «the buildings of the Trade Center must be impressive». «The New York Times» welcomed the announcement, proclaiming: «this is the project that promises to do the most for New York». Tobin, perhaps, had taken Rockefeller a bit too literally. In fact, as Jameson Doig recalls in an amusing, instructive footnote to his book *Empire of the Hudson*, when Tobin and Minoru Yamasaki, the architect commissioned to design the World Trade Center, met with Rockefeller and informed him that the twin towers would have a height of 110 storeys, the Governor asked: «110? So the two buildings have 55 floors each?». «Oh no!», Yamasaki replied: «Each of them will have 110 floors». At this point Rockefeller, turning to his advisor Edward Kresky, and recalling that the Chase Manhattan Building his brother David had built just a few years earlier, the tallest in Lower Manhattan, had only 70 floors, exclaimed: «My God! These towers will make David's building look like a hut!». Though he had no way of knowing this, Nelson Rockefeller had no reason to worry about the fate of the Chase Manhattan Building, which had been built near Wall Street in 1955–61. With the same motivations that guided the initiatives promoted by the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, the skyscraper had been built to house the offices of the gigantic bank David Rockefeller had created with the merger of Chase National Bank and Bank of Manhattan. Nelson Rockefeller's alarm was not justified, as 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza is still a magnificent building today. The Twin Towers were never able to compete with it. It stands on a lot between Pine Street and William Street, close to what is now universally known as Ground Zero. Gordon Bunshaft and Walter Severinghaus masterfully designed and built a monolith clad in glass and aluminium, with a structure that shapes the main elevations, and with a lobby of engaging, monumental simplicity, resting on a slab dug out of a garden of Isamu Noguchi. The tower still stands out today, with its reflecting metal finish, in the Manhattan skyline, and it was the cornerstone on which Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, a/k/a SOM, the studio to which Bunshaft and Severinghaus belonged, built its fortune, making Lower Manhattan a province in its "empire" composed of

describe as resembling a sporting event, rapidly rose. Roland Betts, a personal friend of President George Bush and member of the board of the LMDC, orchestrated the crescendo: he compared the architects on hand to «Rembrandt, da Vinci, Matisse and Jasper Johns» and thanked «President Bush for his concise advice: "do something that will make people proud"». Larry Silverstein was among the important guests, but he left the Winter Garden while the presentations were still in progress. The representatives of the Port Authority were present, and had already been informed of the fact that Silverstein Properties was planning to turn to SOM for the reconstruction of Ground Zero.

Taking the situation and the excitement of the crowd into account, we can understand but not condone the tone adopted by the architects in the presentation of their projects, thus writing a not very edifying page among those that indicate the path of their profession in the 21st century. Norman Foster spoke of «two towers that kiss and touch each other until they become as one», immediately winning them the nickname of the «kissing towers»; Viñoly put himself through a tour de force, illustrating the three different proposals THINK had decided it was worthwhile to present; Peterson and Littenberg spoke of their good intentions with respect to the spirit of old New York; Childs, detached and perhaps embarrassed, left the illustration of SOM's project up to Roger Duffy, one of the studio's best partners; Greg Lynn had a hard time explaining the meaning of the «City in the Sky» he contributed to design, resorting to references to the Hagia Sophia; Richard Meier presented his group of proven talents as a «dream team», while the younger Holl declared: «our idea is to express the sublime». But even the «dream team» could not stand up to the performance staged by Libeskind, displaying the rhetorical ability he has gained by paying the price of a radical metamorphosis «from obscure avant-gardist to determined populist», imposed over the years, also according to Paul Goldberger, by his wife Nina. «Life victorious» were the last words Libeskind pronounced at the Winter Garden, with the tone of a preacher inspired, moreover, by a domestic prompter.

Shortly thereafter, in February 2003, once again it was Roland Betts who announced that the process that would lead to the choice of the master plan for Ground Zero was not yet finished; among the seven projects presented in December, in fact, the LMDC had chosen two, those of Viñoly and Libeskind. After further revisions, they would be subjected to another evaluation. The commission formed by the LMDC and the Port Authority to choose the project to be utilized met on 25 February 2003: late in the evening of the following day, after once again calling in Governor Pataki, Mayor Bloomberg and the two architects, against all forecasts it

was announced that the chosen project, to be reworked in the months to come, was that of Libeskind. The decision was strenuously supported by George Pataki who after being re-elected as Governor saw Ground Zero as a credible launching pad for a run at the White House.

So what did Libeskind design? Though it might seem crude to ask it in this way, the question is only apparently rhetorical. What LMDC wanted to come up with, promoting its «competition», was a master plan. Was what Libeskind designed just that, a plan that would regulate the ways in which the constructions would be distributed on the area of Ground Zero, or was it a project that stands out above all for the form, the concept and meaning attributed to the Freedom Tower, the skyscraper he imagined rising to a height of 541.32 meters? We should not use the metric system, in this case, because it makes the project lose much of its meaning. In fact, as Libeskind hastened to underline, listing the various symbolic virtues, we can only understand the evocative thrust of the Freedom Tower if we measure its height in feet, precisely 1776 of them, to commemorate the year 1776 during which, on the 4th of July, the United States declared its independence from England. There can be little doubt, in any case, that the Freedom Tower, in spite of the way its meaning gets lost in metric translation, is the core of Libeskind's project. Its profile, astutely and demagogically shaped to imitate that of the Statue of Liberty, would have loomed over the entire area of Ground Zero, reconfigured to respond to commemorative intentions and economic interests, to the hopes expressed by Giuliani and the expectations of the Port Authority, the objective ally of Silverstein.

From many different viewpoints, the various interpretations that can be made of the project selected by the LMDC are not unimportant, and the statements made after February 2003 by those involved in various ways in the story do not clarify the ambiguities of the situation. Having reached this point, and having determined that the master plan would call for the construction of such a large number of square meters of edification that all those interested would be satisfied, a bitter clash began over how to resolve those ambiguities. In definitive terms, it was necessary to decide what role to assign to Libeskind, and then to choose the architects who would design the buildings that, at this point, were to be constructed around the central portion of Ground Zero.

Where the Freedom Tower was concerned, for reasons that should be obvious at this point, the contenders were only two in number now: on the one hand, Libeskind and his public relations experts, who were busy trying to make him into the people's choice; on the other, Childs and SOM. In spite of the various attempts made to induce them to work together, the stakes were too

high and their conflicts became increasingly heated. Jano Lieber, a former Under Secretary in the Clinton administration and now Silverstein's right-hand man, while he should have been focusing on Liberty Bonds, legal questions and the management of billions of dollars, was forced to spend many of the hours available on keeping the two architects from fighting. But the time for mediation ran out quickly, just as quickly as that of the theatrics: it was urgent, in fact, to begin building, and it was necessary to announce the names of those who would have the responsibility of designing the skyscrapers that would stand around Ground Zero.

Among those for whom time was of the essence was George Pataki, and as time passed his determination to defend Libeskind's project waned. The context of problems, as we shall see, was also rapidly evolving, but the framework remained the same. The contract between the Port Authority and Silverstein Properties still applied. Though in Libeskind's opinion he is not a man of particularly refined tastes, Silverstein is a man of good sense. He is now in his seventies, but history has changed his life and now obliges him to practice a new profession. After the collapse of the Twin Towers, he is no longer just an important real estate operator, engaged in managing operations of buying, selling and leasing; now he is a builder, no longer working on square feet but on acres, and he has to make decisions that will alter the destiny of his city as well as his bank account. Though the Port Authority plays a leading role and, in any case, shares the outcome, to a great extent he is the one who chooses, and the facts we have narrated leave little doubt regarding his desires as to which architects should be entrusted with the future of the Freedom Tower and Ground Zero. After all, the cards Libeskind and Childs can play to influence his decisions are too different, and those who are betting on them know it.

At the time Libeskind had only built one significant work, the Jüdisches Museum in Berlin. After the conclusion of the competition held by the LMDC, Silverstein resolved to go to Berlin to visit the Museum, but then he gave up on the trip. But every time he goes down to Wall Street he can see the skyscrapers SOM has built in this portion of New York, and observe the profiles of 1 Chase Plaza, 140 Broadway and the US Steel building/1 Liberty Plaza, so close to the eastern edge of Ground Zero. And among the many factors Silverstein must consider when he makes the definitive choice of the architect to hire for the construction of the Freedom Tower, with the billions of dollars of investment involved, for him and for the Port Authority, one prevails over all others and has a precise name: reliability.

Who is more reliable: Libeskind or SOM? But this is truly a rhetorical question. «Danny, you've never de-

signed a skyscraper; now if I had to get heart surgery, I wouldn't go to a surgeon who has never operated on a heart», is the conclusive phrase of a conversation between Silverstein and Libeskind, reported by Paul Goldberger.

At this point there isn't much left to say. All Libeskind can do is call his lawyers and ask them to negotiate with Silverstein Properties for a settlement. In the meantime, the problem of Ground Zero is back in the hands of SOM.

III

Naturally the shadow of the Freedom Tower David Childs had to design was more than menacing for the master plan, and it was not the only threat. Clearly the fate of the tower is inseparable from that of the area. But just how credible is Libeskind's plan? To answer the question and get a better understanding of the latest developments in the situation we need to take a step backwards.

While the competition held by the LMDC for the choice of the master plan was in progress, Governor Pataki made a decision that was incongruous with its timing, but one of great political efficacy, announcing that nothing would ever be built on the portions of Ground Zero corresponding to the footprints of the Twin Towers. Taking this new indication into account, in the spring of 2003, when the «Innovative Design Study» reached its conclusion, the LMDC announced a second competition to choose a project that would transform the area once occupied by the two towers into a Memorial. From any perspective, this decision demonstrates the low level of authority the LMDC is willing to attribute to Libeskind's master plan, given the fact that what he had imagined for the Memorial represents one of the most significant parts of his project. Furthermore, the competition guidelines were not prescriptive; the competitors were left free to accept or reject the indications of the master plan, and the jury was even more permissive on this point. One of the jurors was Maya Lin, and her opinion holds weight; in 1981, while still a student at Yale, she won the competition for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, with a project free of rhetorical accents, the exact opposite of the one designed by Libeskind for Ground Zero.

About 13,000 registrations were received for the new competition, of which 5201 actually participated. In November 2004 the presentation of the eight finalist projects took place, once again at the Winter Garden. Reflecting Absence is the motto of the winning project supported by Maya Lin; its designer is Michael Arad, until then an unknown architect working for the New York City Housing Authority. Because Reflecting Absence does not comply with the stipulations of the master plan, Libeskind soon found himself negotiating with Arad, who was

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