Coming to Terms with the Past in the Semi-Finalist Proposals

The current reconstruction effort is wholly different from the redevelopment of lower Manhattan in the 1960’s. The essential difference resides in the overwhelming emotional undercurrent of the present need for redevelopment. For this reason, it is not surprising that the memorial is the foremost concern in the Principles and Revised Preliminary Blueprint for the Future of Lower Manhattan assembled by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. They write, “Our most important priority is to create a permanent memorial on the World Trade Center site that appropriately honors those who were lost, while reaffirming the democratic ideals that came under attack on September 11.”¹

While I find myself interested in the issues of site planning, architecture, transportation and neighborhood revitalization, the process of memorialization remains the most pressing concern even though it will take much longer to develop an appropriate memorial. There are two reasons for this concern: First, memory and history are interdependent beasts. History is mediated through memory, and memory is mediated through representations of history. Secondly, memory is fragile, constantly in need of reinforcement (like the slurry wall) and vulnerable to the forces of progress (i.e. redevelopment). In the combined effort to ‘Remember, Rebuild, Renew,’ which the LMDC has assumed as its slogan, memory is the most delicate precondition. It is imperative, therefore, that we return to Theodor Adorno’s famous (perhaps ‘infamous’ in some circles) and extremely troubling maxim, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”²

It is quite clear that those who chose the semi-finalists, Studio Libeskind and Think, have taken memorialization as a primary consideration. Each firm gave extensive thought to memory and its social function. Each one grappled with the specific trauma of September 11th by incorporating images of the buildings. Yet, they have emerged with very different ways of responding to memory as a social concept.

My concern with the Think proposal is that with time the significance of the structures may be forgotten. The beautiful latticed towers bear the kind of poetry that Adorno warns against. The twisted rendering of the weapons that brought the towers to the ground and the latticed structures form a representation that may displace the sober reality. This proposal reinterprets the towers as majestic apparitions, replacing what was once a symbol of triumphant capitalism with a symbol of national resolve. I fear that such a substitution will devalue the healing process, that it will allow New Yorkers and Americans to avoid dealing with the memory.

I won’t argue that the melodramatic quality of the design will necessarily cause the visitor to repress the memory of what happened, though I am tempted to follow this line of thought. However, I will argue that the beauty of the design and its idealistic function allow the visitor to forgo the process of ‘coming to terms with the past.’ This is not merely a process of accepting what has happened. Mastering the past, as Adorno refers to it, also requires examining the causes of what happened in order to move forward. It requires a certain amount of introspection, which ought to be brought into the design. Remembering is a delicate psychological process. It may be easily undermined by ideals of perseverance and the return to prosperity. It is as though our only need is to accept the loss of life when in fact
a great deal more was lost with the destruction of the towers. The ghostly outline of the
towers is almost pompous, as though we as the victims have no need to examine the past, but
only to keep the past in mind.

I am more inclined towards Daniel Libeskind’s proposal because it keeps the doors of
memory ajar. Libeskind’s submission does not attempt to conceal memory beneath a veil of
hope and resolute optimism, yet it includes these emotions in its highly symbolic forms.
Incorporating the slurry wall (if it is technically possible to do so) and placing a museum at
the center of ground zero will give the visitor more opportunity to accept what is lost as well
as question the causes. This can happen because of the program of forms. The slurry wall
functions as a relic, viscerally linking the visitor to that which has been destroyed. High
above the wall, the gardens and spire call attention to the principles that our country stands
for. Between the two symbolic forms, a museum serves the process of edification. Though
some of my criticisms of Think’s design are also applicable to Libeskind’s design, in concept
the latter seeks to accept the loss and face our collective memory.

A true memorial will do more than simply accept the past by keeping it in mind; it will
allow us to come to terms with the past. In his essay, “What Does Coming to Terms with the
Past Mean?,” Adorno writes, “We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes
of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell
of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken.”

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3 Adorno, Theodor. “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” in Geoffrey Hartman, ed. Bitburg in