

OPINION

Rebuilding at ground zero

A global urban design project

By Lawrence A. Herzog

It is the new global millennium — where urban planning is elevated to international diplomacy, architecture tied to the global psyche.

Ground zero. A 16-acre bombed out crater in the belly of lower Manhattan. If memory lies in the visual cityscape — then memory is fading fast. Cranes, bulldozers and work crews have extracted most of the physical evidence of tragedy. But no amount of cosmetic shifting of concrete chunks or maimed steel girders can sweep away the collage of global grief that hovers here, as thick as clouds of dust, like those stirred up on the day two soaring skyscrapers fell to the Earth.

One year after Sept. 11 we still don't know what is to be the fate of the now most familiar parcel of urban real estate on the planet? How will ground zero be healed?

Few urban design projects in the last century have resonated around the world as strongly as

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the proposed future redevelopment of ground zero. The world knows this space — it witnessed live telecasts of the twin towers destruction. Now the global community waits to see what kind of grand gesture will put a permanent mark on this site of sadness.

People are wondering: what will replace the viewing platform and the barricades covered in tee shirts, scraps of paper, poems, photographs, crucifixes and bracelets?

In the first go around, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation commissioned six master plans for ground zero. Early in July, over 5,000 New Yorkers were invited to comment on the master plans. The public response was deafening in its rejection of the models: "Nothing here is truly monumental," they screamed. Families of victims called the memorial "insulting." A university critic said: "The plans have inspired no one in the city, region or world. They are fundamentally flawed because they lack imagination."

For ground zero, imagination is everything when it comes to designing a space so wrought with symbolism, emotion, global conflict. An aesthetic memorial gesture in the public space is the central priority — the functional needs for office space must respond to the central public space, and not vice versa. This is the mistake made in the first round of commissioned designs.

So how to invent a memorial site fitted to the complex global emotional, social, political and architectural implications of Sept. 11?

First, ground zero needs a monumental community space. But, the United States does not have a good track record here. In America "monumental architecture" is viewed as archaic — the pyramids of Egypt, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the great Inca City of Macchu Pichu. Buildings here have become like consumer products — designed to have a short shelf life. We no longer construct our cities to last for centuries.

Ground zero also demands a transcendental public plaza. But great plazas have never been a forte in America. Resplendent urban squares lie outside our borders — in Venice (Piazza San Marcos), Rome (St. Peter's Square), Moscow (Red Square), London (Trafalgar Square) or Beijing (Tiananmen Square).

The greatness of squares across the globe lies in the haunting and magical way they evoke a



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feeling of mystery, a sense of place, and a taste of the past, somehow embedded in a real place in a city with memory, with architectural tradition.

We can learn about memory from our closest southern neighbor, Mexico. Every Mexican city is filled with public monuments, dating to the late 19th century, when President Porfirio Diaz devoted part of the public treasury to the creation of equestrian statues, sculptures and other memorials for the many urban plazas.

Mexicans love their plazas. The historic Zocalo (main plaza) of Mexico City is visceral in its gargantuan scale — it speaks of ancient Aztec or Mayan cities. It has become the sacred plaza of the nation. Every September, on Mexican independence day, a half million people or more gather here, and with their president perched on a balcony at the National Palace, shout "Viva Mexico."

So where to look in the United States for inspiration?

I suggest the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., maybe the greatest modern day public monument north of the Mexican border. Consider the difficult task facing Architect Maya Lin — a war that had divided the nation, and left behind a dark legacy. But Lin found inspiration in imagining how the site

could both embrace history and transcend it. "I thought about what death is, what a loss is," she notes. "A sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time, the grass would heal it. As if you open the rock and polish it."

To enter the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, you descend into the earth, below ground, cut off from the streets and urban noise. Suddenly there are black marble walls and silence. The design jolts you; it forces you to contemplate the past: death, life, change.

Ground zero needs delicate urban surgery — implant an urban context that is both functional, but monumental in its gesture toward tragedy. The site must be integrated into the urban core, yet at least part of it, the memorial space, must also be detached. The site should be both quiet (like the Vietnam Memorial) and busy, like a Mexican plaza. It should be alive, connected, and spontaneous, but it should also speak of memory, however painful that is. Nearly 5,000 New Yorkers have already shown what a mistake it will be to ignore memory. The rest of the world awaits.

Herzog, born in New York City, is professor of the Graduate Program in City Planning at San Diego State University. His most recent book is "From Aztec to High Tech: Architecture and Landscape Across the Mexico-United States Border."