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What will be the fate of the planet's most famous real estate space?

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Ground Zero: The Globalization of an Urban Design Project

By [Lawrence Herzog](#) | Sunday, September 08, 2002

We live in a world where urban planning is elevated to international diplomacy — and architecture is tied to the global psyche. As Lawrence Herzog explains, nowhere is this as evident as at the site of the former World Trade Center. As plans are being debated for a memorial to the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks, where can modern-day architects look for inspiration?

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 profound tragedy.

Hiding the grief

But no amount of cosmetic shifting of concrete chunks or maimed steel girders can sweep away the collage of global grief that hovers here. It is — and remains — as thick as clouds of dust, like those stirred up on the day two soaring skyscrapers fell to the earth.

**"I thought about what death is, what a loss is. A sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar."
(Architect Maya Lin)**

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.

Another September 11 is here, one year later. 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 the proposed future redevelopment of Ground Zero. The world knows this space — it witnessed live telecasts of the

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From towers to park

A design for Ground Zero? That question once troubled only architects, planners and construction engineers bent over their drafting tables.

Suddenly, it is on the minds of everyone — from New Yorkers to the world community. They are wondering: What will replace the viewing platform and the barricades covered in T-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 2002, 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," screamed one group.

Memorial or open casket?

"The memorial feels like an open casket," shouted another. Families of victims were even more blunt — the memorial, they offered, is "insulting." One university critic finally commented: "The plans have inspired no one in the city, region or world. They are fundamentally flawed because they lack imagination."

Imagination is everything when it comes to designing a space so wrought with symbolism, emotion and global conflict. The first point is to recognize that in the design for Ground Zero, 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, not the other way around. This is the mistake made in the first round of commissioned designs.

All dimensions of September 11

So how to design a monumental public space fitted to the complex global emotional, social, political and architectural implications of September 11?

attacks.

Ground Zero demands a stunning, unforgettable public plaza. And again, great plazas have never been a forte in America.

Mexicans love their plazas. The town square encapsulates Mexico's embrace of spectacle, of memory — and of the celebration of the fraternity of people.

The first challenge here is that modern architecture in the United States does not have a good track record of producing great public places and monuments. Where are the great urban public works of the 20th century?

More likely, they are in Europe or elsewhere, not in America. In fact, in the United States, "monumental architecture" is seen as a thing of the past — the pyramids of Egypt, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the great Inca city of Macchu Pichu.

Short-lived cities

Architecture, like consumer products, is designed here to have a short shelf life. We have never really learned from early 20th century Chicago urbanist Daniel Burnham, who insisted we "make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood . . . " We continue to create temporary spaces and buildings. We no longer build our cities to last for centuries.

Ground Zero demands a stunning, unforgettable public plaza. And again, great plazas have never been a forte in America. When we think of resplendent urban squares around the globe, what come to mind are Piazza San Marco (Venice), St Peter's Square (Rome), Red Square (Moscow), Trafalgar Square (London), Tiananmen Square (Beijing).

New York City has Times Square, but beyond the New Year's Eve spectacle, it is not a great public place.

Great squares of Europe

What makes these other squares great is the haunting and magical way they create a sense of mystery, a sense of place, a taste of the past. All of that has to be somehow embedded in a real place — in a city with history, with memory, with architectural tradition.

Americans can learn much about memory from their closest southern neighbor, Mexico. Every Mexican city is filled with public monuments, dating to the late 19th century.

Back then, President Porfirio Diaz devoted part of the public treasury to the creation of great equestrian statues, sculptures and other monuments in large cities.

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More than 100 years later, parks, plazas, promenades, traffic circles and other central places in all Mexican cities are still adorned with monuments honoring everything from fallen heroes, to locally crafted products (hats, baskets, etc.) to moments in history.

Looking to Mexico for inspiration

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Architecture, like consumer products, is designed here to have a short shelf life.

Mexico City's historic Zocalo (main plaza) is visceral in its gargantuan scale — it speaks of ancient Aztec or Mayan cities. It has become the sacred plaza of the nation. The Zocalo is framed by the architecture of memory — the cathedral, the National Palace, former homes of the Spanish conquerors,

exposed ruins of the Aztec imperial capital of Tenochtitlan.

Every September, on Mexican independence day, half a million people or more gather here, and with their president perched on a balcony at the National Palace, shout "Viva Mexico."

A U.S. model?

Is there anywhere 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 —

in her proposed design for the project. Here was a war that divided the nation, and left behind a dark legacy. Lin was confident a design could be crafted to fit the mood of history.

She says, "I thought about what death is, what a loss is. 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."

A cut that won't heal

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 out of your everyday frame of mind.

It forces you to contemplate the enormity of life, death, change. The walk is an urban meditation, until you climb the path back up to the city, and its worries and daily routines.

Ground Zero needs delicate urban surgery. It needs to 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 mistake made in the first round of commissioned designs is that the functional needs for office space must respond to the central public space.

Balancing the quiet and the busy

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. 5,000 New Yorkers have already shown what a mistake it will be to ignore memory. The rest of the world awaits.