NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEW YORK POST, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2001

Attack of the Urban Planners

NICOLE GELINAS

REBUILDING NEW YORK

AN energized breed of urban planners and architectural critics has descended upon the wreckage of the World Trade Center to force upon us their visions of the future.

These individuals have proposed ideas as variedly idiotic and singularly insulting to the memory of what was lost as to build the United Nations on the site (architectural critic *Fred Bernstein), to build an art museum* (former Battery Park City Authority chief Richard Kahan), or to achieve "environmental justice" (urban planner Roberta Brandes Gratz).

Before we can contemplate the future of the World Trade Center, we must accurately reflect on its past. We mustn't let an eager crew of ex-city officials and civic-minded morons rewrite the history of the Trade Center or "improve" upon its alleged flaws.

It would be cruel to rebuild 110-story towers and expect our colleagues to work in them — but it would be crueler still to let observers use the attacks to right architectural wrongs done in other parts of the city during the past half-century.

Some complain that the Trade Center plaza was windswept and empty. Roberta Gratz frets that the concourse mall was dark, plain and airless, that the Trade Center's public spaces were inadequate. Not a few local urban planners see a chance to return the site to Manhattan's traditional street grid.

Yes, the plaza was often windswept — most of downtown is windy, because the area bears the brunt of two rivers. But it was never empty.

The underground mall may have been architecturally urbane, but it was the closest approximation to Washington's Union Station that New York had: a bustling, enclosed shopping center that served as the passageway between major transportation hubs.

A return to the street grid? I can think of nothing more misguided than to ignore the history of what was one of the most open spaces in Lower Manhattan — the fountained and sculptured plaza between the towers.

The plaza between the Twin Towers, and the closed-off streets around them, always served as a respite from the Wall Street area's narrow, canyonlike streets, with 50-story buildings set in just inches from narrow sidewalks.

Remember: The World Trade Center community *thrived* until the moment when the first plane hit. The testimony of the relatives of so many who perished speaks to this. Countless obituaries since 9/11 have mentioned that a spouse, a daughter, a brother brimmed with pride at the fact that he or she worked in the Trade Center.

The World Trade Center was a destiny that gave meaning and purpose to the most menial of jobs.

Beware too the professional memorializers, who in their quest for architectural and cultural stardom will try to force a monument upon us too soon and without context.

A memorial is not an antidote to grief; the survivors grieve privately, as they always have. The purpose of a memorial is to remember; we cannot remember until we begin to forget. We will not begin to forget for many years. The Lincoln Memorial was not dedicated until 1922, the Jefferson Memorial until 1943.

The World Trade Center was, unfortunately, perfect the way it was. To build anything that is not as good or better would be the saddest memorial to all that was destroyed.

Nicole Gelinas (nicolegeli@hotmail.com) is a financial editor who worked across the street from the World Trade Center.

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