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... With A Dubious Idea Of 'Freedom'

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VOIDS are made for shape-shifting: images of transformation sparked by hope for the future and fear of the unknown. For almost two years, many images have taken the form of possible "cultural uses" for ground zero. An opera house by Sir Norman Foster? An art museum by Frank Gehry?

These are plausible, even worthy ideas. But they are misplaced. They could go anywhere. While they may satisfy the craving to fill up the void, as quickly as possible, they bear no historical relationship to the events that brought the void into being.

Nor do they match the cultural value of the void itself. That vast emptiness has stimulated the public to create its own self-portrait in the incessant stream of fantasies that people have been sketching around this site since Sept. 11.

The most recent of these fantasies has just arrived in the form of a small brochure titled "The Campaign for a Museum of Freedom." Put out by a committee headed by Tom A. Bernstein, co-owner of the Chelsea Piers sports complex on the Hudson River, the pamphlet outlines in general terms an idea that has been circulating for more than a year in civic and political circles.

Unlike the art museum and opera house, the Museum of Freedom does emerge from the specific historical circumstances of the site. Unfortunately, as described in the brochure, the concept distorts those circumstances toward political ends. I have a strong suspicion that this campaign is going to fail.

Still, the pamphlet deserves a prominent place in the permanent record of ground zero fantasies. Brief as it is, this document nonetheless performs a valuable service. It exposes, more explicitly than we critics have, the degree to which the ground zero design process has become saturated with political ideology.



A visitor speaking through the megaphone of the Freedom of Expression National Monument, built on the landfill created during construction of the World Trade Center. The site is now Battery Park City.

CREW/T&E

The cover bears an artist's rendering of an aerial view of the site, as it might appear if Daniel Libeskind's drawings were to be realized as actual buildings. We're looking down, toward a green open space encircled by the famous spiral of skyscrapers. Though the rendering is crude, it nonetheless captures the crystalline quality of Mr. Libeskind's formal vocabulary, and his design's indebtedness to German Expressionist architecture of the 1910's and early 1920's.

The chamfered tops of the glass towers, the diagonal patterns of their window mullions, convey the impression that these are the shattered remnants of much larger buildings: the twin towers, by implication. The spiral configuration replicates what the Expressionists called the Stadtkrone, or city crown. Designed for mass spectacle and social ritual, these fruits of the Weimar Republic remained fantasies on paper. Though possibly unaware of this historical precedent and its complex cultural associations, the Museum Planning Committee obviously envisions the Stadtkrone as a worthy model for this site.

The open space is dominated by a large object of faceted glass that resembles an immense diamond solitaire. Since none of the structures shown in the rendering are identified, it's not clear whether this form is intended to represent a building or a sculpture. To judge from its central placement, however, the jewel-like shape could be a place-holder for the memorial now being planned.

Lower structures, partly formed from the bases of the skyscrapers, enclose two sides

of the green open space. Also rendered to suggest faceted glass, these structures are tinted in blue and red: patriotic colors, perhaps, or hints of sapphires and rubies. Indeed, with the white diamond glow of the towers and the emerald grass of the open space (itself shown as a tapestry of light refracted through crystal), the entire rendering evokes a gigantic parure of precious stones. Students of Expressionism will have no difficulty recognizing a precedent for this image in Bruno Taut's *Alpine Architecture*, one of the best-known examples of the *Stadtkrone* genre.

A second rendering moves in for a closer view of the site. It's still an aerial perspective — figures on the ground register as dots — but the angle of vision has shifted, and the focus is on the lower crystalline structures. Perhaps these are meant to indicate the Museum of Freedom's location and scale. The palette has changed, from precious stones to harlequin colors, red and green, composed in the traditional diamond-shaped motley of commedia dell'arte costumes.

Kunhardt Productions, makers of a PBS documentary series, "Freedom: A History of US," is credited with developing the design and content of the museum. The brochure describes the project as integral to Mr. Libeskind's "unifying concept" of the master plan: "the 'assault' on freedom." Like the word "campaign" and the fragmented forms of the towers, the content proposed for the museum is consistent with this martial motif.

The content is programmed in four educational "modules" that recount, in concentric rings, mankind's struggle for emancipation from mental and physical enslave-

ment. Ground zero, the site of the terrorists' assault, is the subject of the first module. As we proceed outward through the rings, the narrative encompasses more and more territory, like an advancing army: New York ("the world's second home"). America ("the story of its ever-widening circle of freedom"). Last, but not least, the World ("will shine a spotlight on places that lack basic human freedoms").

The brochure is seasoned with quotes from Abraham Lincoln, George Bush, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Emma Lazarus and even Mr. Libeskind. It is

**An alternate proposal:
Rebuild a project from
the summer of 1984
that let people talk back
to the twin towers.**

adorned with archive photographs (the Berlin Wall) and comes complete with budget estimate (\$250 million) and a note on financing: "The Museum of Freedom will be a public-private partnership that will rely on funding from government sources as well as the private sector."

Save your money. I have a much simpler and cheaper idea in mind. Consistent with the values of historic preservation, not to mention the theme of freedom, I propose reconstructing a project that stood not far from ground zero for a brief time in the

summer of 1984.

Entitled Freedom of Expression National Monument, this collaborative project was designed by the New York artist-architect team of Laurie Hawkinson, John Malpede and Erika Rothenberg. It was produced by Creative Time's Art on the Beach program, which occupied the landfill created by excavations for the World Trade Center, and is now the site of Battery Park City. Anita Contini, who now heads the memorial design committee for the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, was at that time Creative Time's director.

Inspired by early Soviet agit-prop art, the monument consisted of a large red megaphone mounted atop a flight of stairs and pointed toward the twin towers. Visitors were invited to climb the stairs and, in effect, talk back to those massive symbols of state authority and economic power. As the team put it, using the megaphone made people feel "both powerful and powerless at the same time."

To my knowledge, there exists no record of the statements made by visitors to the monument: the curtain had yet to rise on the brave new world of ceaseless digital documentation. This omission could be easily rectified were the monument to be rebuilt today, however, and the need for such a public platform has never been greater than it is now.

Throughout the ground zero design process, many New Yorkers have felt "powerful and powerless at the same time." They have spoken, but with little conviction that they are being heard. Should I have a turn at such a mouthpiece, this is what I would say:

Not everyone saw the twin towers as symbols of freedom. For some, they repre-

sented the Kafkaesque mental enslavement of government bureaucracy and dull office routine. For others, they stood for Rockefeller power: for oil, that is to say, and the bizarre things we do to satisfy our need for it.

NOT everyone thinks that the United States is ideally poised at this moment to point fingers at "places that lack basic human freedoms." I note, with approval, that the Freedom Museum will be linked to the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. But I see scant evidence of conscience in the brochure. Us good, others bad: where's the conscience in that?

Ideally, I would like to voice such opinions without being branded a traitor, a pro-terrorist, or a person opposed to freedom. But I see no indication that your museum will be much help in this regard. I see only one underlying assumption expressed in your brochure: freedom has been assaulted, therefore retaliation is legitimate — even more, is part of the heroic struggle that includes the cause of civil rights.

On the basis of this assumption, the victims of Sept. 11 have been posthumously enlisted as martyrs to a cause they may or may not have supported. But we will never know. And it is not our decision to make.

At what point does a cultural use like your educational modules become indistinguishable from a strategy room for territorial expansion? Will your museum encourage honest debate on issues like this? Martial rhetoric is seldom a sure-fire sign of tolerance for dissent. □