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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK; At Ground Zero, the Freshest Architecture May Be the Answer

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New York has given itself a priceless gift. It has opened the minds of government officials to the idea of contemporary architecture. Thanks entirely to public pressure, our great city has taken a giant step toward reclaiming a place of world leadership in the civil art of building.

Today a new set of plans for the World Trade Center site will be presented at the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center at Battery Park City. The participants include some of the most influential figures in contemporary architecture: Richard Meier, Steven Holl, Rafael Viñoly, Peter Eisenman, Greg Lynn, Lord Foster, Charles Gwathmey, Daniel Libeskind, Ben van Berkel and Shigeru Ban. Not since 1947, when an international design team met to plan the United Nations headquarters, has a comparable list of architectural talent set to work on a New York project.

Alas, without continuing public pressure this tantalizing gift may soon fade away like a vision of sugar plums. Under the supervision of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, an ad hoc state agency set up to oversee new construction in the financial district, the design process has become highly politicized. Until last month the process was driven by Gov. George E. Pataki's re-election campaign. Throughout, it has been compromised by cronyism, ineptitude and bad faith. Conflicts of interest glare.

Plans by seven teams are scheduled for presentation today. All but one of the teams was selected from a list prepared by an independent jury earlier this year. The exception -- the New York office of Peterson Littenberg -- is disturbing. Peterson Littenberg is the state agency's in-house planners. Its inclusion has put the other six teams in the strange position of competing against the agency that will be judging their work.

Officials of the development corporation have described this new round of designs as a study project. Since announcing the project last summer, they have repeatedly changed the rules. They are not obliged to adopt any of the ideas proposed.

It doesn't help that the new plans are going on view at a time of year when many New Yorkers are looking forward to some holiday relaxation. Perhaps officials are hoping that all of us will be lying on a beach while key decisions are being made. Well, this is what it's like to be contemporary in New York in 2002.

Even considering the gravity of the occasion, contemporary architecture is meant to be enjoyed. The experience differs from the reassuring pleasure of comfort food, however. It is more akin to eating sushi for the first time and discovering that you like it. The sensation is intensified by defying the instinctual fear of the unknown.

In contemporary architecture the present is revealing itself, and it may take time to overcome inertia. New Yorkers are used to living on the threshold. But this is the first time a public agency has stepped right up to it in architecture on a historically significant scale. For many, the very idea of contemporary architecture is unfamiliar. The term is not synonymous with modernism, although the work it describes may share deep historical roots with movements in 20th-century design. "Oh, I've seen that before!" is one way of marginalizing contemporary work. So is the thoughtless use of labels like trendy, weird, elitist and avant-garde. It is all or none of those things.

Not everything built in the present day deserves to be called contemporary. Walter Pater, the Victorian critic, advised his colleagues to ask themselves regarding the work of any period, "In whom did the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period find itself?" Today we'd ask, "Where's the energy?" I would advise our public officials to address that question to the new plans. Who's cooking?

Certainly these qualities were not present in any of the six schemes presented to the public at the now legendary town meeting at the Javits Center last June. Prepared by Peterson Littenberg and another local firm, Beyer Blinder Belle, the plans were flaccid, shopworn simulations of a completely different period -- New York circa 1928. To its eternal credit, the public rejected them. Morning-after spin notwithstanding, the development corporation was not prepared for the failure of its efforts to manipulate public opinion.

It is possible to sketch the contemporary virtues more precisely than Pater did. Many of these qualities have recurred frequently in great architecture at least since the Renaissance. Chief among them is the architect's relationship to authority -- client, ruler, public, user, God and self. Contemporary architecture is essentially an argument with the idea of external authority -- with the claims of structured belief systems on free minds.

An argument is not a rejection. The exchange can be by turns spirited, raucous and serene. Those who lead the argument are invariably sensitive to language. They care not only about the ways that buildings look and function, but also about the ways they are described. If you started out in professional life as a post-Modernist, for example, you may want to belittle modern architecture as a period style developed in the 1920's and 30's.

Seen in this way, an architect like Mr. Meier may look like a fugitive from the 20th century laboring with an outmoded formal vocabulary. Fortunately, there are other ways to see his work: as a personal exploration of ideas derived from the 18th-century Enlightenment, for example. This interpretation might lack the charm of ease. Among other things, it would require abandoning the notion that modern architecture was "anti-history." Or rejecting the simple equation of architectural history with period forms, instead of considering the ideological conflicts that infused those forms with meaning.

More important, it would involve accepting that a personal exploration can be of substantial value to society at large. This is why language has become a pivotal issue for architecture today. Words convey point of view. Descriptions reflect subjective states. The contemporary city is a place of multiple perspectives that occasionally add up to a fleeting fusion of subjective perception and objective truth.

Many believe that architects should speak a common language. In recent years the use of design guidelines has been viewed as a sign of social responsibility. In fact, a culture as diverse as ours is more likely to attain common ground by questioning norms than by accepting them. This is the essential function of internal authority. It is best exercised in the present, when norms are imposed. Resisting received wisdom is precisely how contemporary architecture gets its stir, its energy, its juice. Architects, like other artists, are stand-ins, delegates from the inner life.

This has nothing to do with the Ayn Rand/"Fountainhead" stereotype of the big architectural ego imposing its will upon society. Internal authority is rooted in the humanist tradition of testing the limits of society's will to impose its authority on us.

Frank Lloyd Wright said a modern society had to get buildings and cities "thought built" before they could be physically realized. Contemporary architecture is an unfolding process in which the projection of fantasy plays a critical role. In the last 16 months, New York has become highly educated about how this process works. We've seen fantasy after fantasy projected onto that gigantic void, and the exercise has not been wasteful. It is helping to renegotiate the contract between builders and citizens over the framing of urbanism for our time.

Over the years, I've probably filed more stories on unbuilt projects than on completed works because the process of realization is where contemporaneity rests. Just recently I have been looking at pictures of two projects that show different facets of this process.

The Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati is Zaha Hadid's first building in the United States. The project is now nearing completion. It took nerve to undertake this work. Merely by selecting the design, Cincinnati covered itself with glory. Next year the city will give us the chance to be inside a building by one of the dazzling talents of our generation.

New York did not show such courage when the American Crafts Museum selected an architect of less extravagant gifts to design its future venue at the Edward Durrell Stone building at 2 Columbus Circle. The stakes for architecture here warrant a separate story. Suffice it to say that contemporary design has yet to be "thought built" in our great city. And some people intend to keep it that way.

Thought building, however, is integral to contemporary architecture itself. The term does not only apply to completed buildings, wonderful as it can be when they break through. It includes every step in the unfolding, from an initial concept, to its treatment by different architects taking different paths, to the public reception of alternatives and the conflicts they stir up.

Ground zero should be approached in that spirit. There is no need to pick a winner, no need to fear whatever design strikes you as the worst thing that could ever happen to New York. For now, this is all in the mind.