
December 28, 2003

ARCHITECTURE: THE LOWS; Banner Year For Lost Opportunities

By HERBERT MUSCHAMP

The biggest disappointment of the year has been the failure of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation to protect the ground zero planning process from political interference. I refer not only to the fast-track timetable decreed by Gov. George E. Pataki, which has imposed the civic equivalent of cloture on public discussion, but to the symbolic subtext of Daniel Libeskind's design concept, which is political in assuming that answers have been found to questions that have not yet been asked.

The second biggest disappointment has been Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's decision to sit on the sidelines while the integrity of the process has been jeopardized. For two years, the planning process has veered back and forth between the possibility of an idea and unenlightened self-interest in its most brutal form. Why hasn't the mayor brought some reason to bear on this?

* The refusal of the New York City Landmarks Commission to hold hearings on the future of 2 Columbus Circle is a shocking dereliction of public duty. Unacceptable in itself, this abdication also raises the scary question of what other buildings the commission might choose to overlook in the future.

* Stop all the dithering on Morningside Heights! Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia University, missed a chance to nab Zaha Hadid to succeed Bernard Tschumi as dean of the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. Mr. Tschumi's departure leaves a leadership void that requires a figure of Ms. Hadid's stature. This is not a time when our academic institutions can afford to drift.

* Speaking of drift, the Cooper-Hewitt, the National Design Museum, edges ever further toward the brackish whirlpool of amateurism, publicity-mongering and fund-raising stunts. Where did we get the idea that Paul Thompson, the museum's British director, would bring with him European standards of scholarship and intellectual bite? What we've seen instead is sell-out with a vengeance.

* It seems that the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art has decided to abandon the ambitious expansion plan designed by Rem Koolhaas that was launched two years ago with great fanfare. It also seems that the museum has neglected to inform the public and even the architect of its change of heart. I guess it just forgot. HERBERT MUSCHAMP