The Man Who Dared the City To Think Again

By ALAIS GORDON

FEDERICO SCHWARTZ flitted at flash of lightning in the window of his architecture studio in Soho. "Did you see that? It's an airplane," he said, pointing at the footage of a commercial jet banking harmlessly over the Hudson River.

Mr. Schwartz is unusually sensitive to sudden shifts in light and sound, and with good reason. "I'm getting ready to go to work when the first plane flew over my left," he said. "I called it! I believed it even then, at least that's how I remember it. I just stood there, it was 11:30, I didn't think."

He ran to the corner of Church and Canal Streets to see whether the building was still standing.

Mr. Schwartz then did what came naturally: he began to draw, sketching quietly with a sheath of paper and a pen. On the back of a cardboard cofee cup he sketched the towers engendered by black clouds. "I keep drawing horrible things," he said. "I drew what I saw."

Within weeks, the nighttime imagery had subsided, replaced by Mr. Schwartz's first glimpse of how Lower Manhattan might be reimagined and restored. "I started to redraw the skyline, I started to draw what should happen," he said.

These representational drawings were the conceptual seeds of a master plan for downtown redevelopment — a plan that was published earlier this month in The New York TimeMagazine. The plan is now being displayed at Venice at the Eighteenth International Architecture Exhibition at the Biennale. It was drafted as an alternative to the official version unveiled in July by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, which met with public resistance.

Under Mr. Schwartz's proposed design, the 16-acre site at ground zero would be left alone, permitting a responsible period of reflection before a permanent memorial can be agreed upon. He would instead turn part of West Street, the forbidding multi-lane highway, into a tunnel running south from Battery Park to Chambers Street, and build on the reclaimed land atop. He envisions a series of parks and buildings linked by a tree-lined promenade that would run from the Battery to the Brooklyn Bridge, with footbridges and pedestrian tunnels.

IN PLACE: Federico Schwartz, above left, outside his Soho loft, which has a table above, by Alan Buchbass, a house-shaped chair by Mr. Schwartz and a sun-shaped chair by Robert Venturi. Left, a "think pad" designed this year by Mr. Schwartz for the Deutsch advertising agency's offices in Los Angeles.

Schwartz has no official planning role, but he has managed to insinuate himself into the redevelopment process by becoming a regular presence at public hearings. Many days he would attend a development corporation meeting at 10 a.m., and then, in the evening, go to a community board meeting. "I started to get involved," he said. "I'd go to meeting after meeting."

He would listen patiently before taking the floor to remind the assembled that the objective was to create a plan that would include all of Lower Manhattan, not just ground zero. "Sometimes, I would go ballistic," he said. "I would say, 'Don't you get it? If you keep thinking about the site, you're stuck.'"

While Mr. Schwartz does not have an official title, his presence has paid off. In April he presented his ideas to Amanda Burden, chairwoman of the City Planning Commission. He also showed his plan to the Battery Park City Authority and to Alexander Garvin, head of planning and design at the development corporation. "He's intense," said Nancy Greene, a chairwoman of the land use committee of Community Board 1.

In July, Mr. Schwartz began meeting with a group of other architects dissatisfied with the development corporation's six designs. "He orchestrated these drawings, and we all realized that he had done a tremendous amount of research," said Charles Gwathmey, one of the participating architects. "It was the one thing that we all agreed on in West Street. Mr. Schwartz showed the opportunities and the obstacles they have to deal with the 6 acres of the World Trade Center." 

Rafael Volovsky, another collaborating architect, said: "Fed's plan removed the limitations on the thinking process." 

Two weeks before his plan was published, Mr. Schwartz entered the Fair on Spring Street, a favored neighborhood spot. "I was told it was a secret, but I just found out," he said. "I saw it at a table. I bought it because I thought it was a good idea." He said that the plan is now being displayed at the Eighteenth International Architecture Exhibition at the Biennale. It was drafted as an alternative to the official version unveiled in July by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, which met with public resistance.

Mr. Schwartz continues to refine his ideas and has begun to focus on the ways in which he can work with the community. He said, "I want to be different from other memorialists." He added, "I have to have bigger ideas. You're dealing with heaven and hell."