Architecture

The Other Side of Darkness

Out of the ashes of the World Trade Center comes a new vision for tall buildings in the contemporary world

by John Bentley Mays

Scrambling to beat the symbolic deadline presented by last fall’s fifth anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attack on New York’s World Trade Center, the people with the job of putting up something new on that enormously charged ground made public their final decisions about tower designs on September 7, 2006. We learned that the architects anointed to do the work—Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, and Fumihiko Maki—are to provide three buildings to accompany the 102-storey Freedom Tower, by David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. All are disappointingly routine exercises, as it turns out, and predictably uninspiring outcomes of an architectural process that has been clouded from the outset by too-lofty public idealism and careless private ambition, by the all-too-human vanity of architects and bureaucrats, politicians and critics, and by American uncertainties in the first years of the new millennium.

At least once during the five years before last September, however, this generally dim process became incandescent. From the murk of competing forces that hovered over Ground Zero emerged ideas about skyscraper architecture’s past and future that transcended all the much-reported political and cultural machinations in New York and made a contribution worth remembering to the culture of building in the contemporary world.

This remarkable moment began with a failure in the summer of 2002, when New York’s public and critical attention to the site of the disaster was still fervent. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, a state and city agency created after 9/11 to mend the torn fabric of New York, showed
architectural ideas for Ground Zero that pleased no one. But such was the effervescent atmosphere of the time that this embarrassment, instead of discouraging further efforts at original thought, prompted a fresh determination on the part of the LMDC and other agencies, architects, and ordinary citizens to look harder for excellent solutions. The name of this fresh initiative was the Innovative Design Study.

The IDS was supposed to be not a competition but a showcase of architectural ruminations about the general nature of the site. The public and professional fascination with the Trade Center location at the time, however, along with its status as the most closely watched building site on earth, quickly transformed the IDS into an intellectual and artistic contest of the best and liveliest sort. The LMDC received 406 submissions from around the globe. From this number, seven teams were asked to make proposals, given three months to prepare their entries, and handed a very modest honorarium of $40,000 for taking part. When the proposals by the invited architects were made public, at a packed news conference in the Winter Garden of New York's World Financial Center on December 18, 2002, the event got the most intense international media coverage of any architectural occasion in the world since the collapse of the towers themselves. In the weeks that followed, 100,000 visitors saw the models and drawings, and six million people visited the LMDC website.

A jury organized by the LMDC chose two finalists in early 2003—Studio Daniel Libeskind and a team known as THINK, led by Rafael Viñoly and Frederic Schwartz—from among the seven groups and individuals who had been invited to enter the race. In late February 2003, Libeskind's master plan was picked as the winner, whereupon began the next round of wrangling and bluster, conflicts between architects and real-estate interests and public agencies, all of which continued until September 7, 2006.

Though he lost his very public fight to press on from the IDS and design the skyscrapers—David Childs got the commission for the Freedom Tower in May 2003—Libeskind was always right in believing the IDS was about far more than master planning. The designers involved in this exercise had created viable architecture, schemes for buildable skyscrapers that were persuasive, forceful statements of contemporary imagination, each demanding serious attention as an argument about what the tall building can be and what it could look like in the twenty-first century.

Take, for example, the proposal by THINK group, which included architect Shigeru Ban and landscape architect Ken Smith as well as Viñoly and Schwartz. Of their three initial suggestions, the one chosen for final consideration consisted of a pair of tall, hollow, latticework cylinders—which could be read as phantasmal recollections of Minoru Yamasaki's twin World Trade Center towers—connected high above the ground by a diaphanous wisp of architectural fabric. Suspended inside each tube would be cultural facilities,
including a conference centre and a performing-arts complex.

Called the World Cultural Center, THINK’s plan barely acknowledged the enduring desires of the private interests at Ground Zero for the replacement of ten million square feet of office space lost on g/t. Instead, the consortium offered a monumental tribute to the creative spirit, as that elusive spirit is incarnate in plays, symphonies, and artworks. THINK’s buildings, with their cultural facilities held aloft by a fragile-looking material, would be deeply poignant counterstatements to the mindlessness of violence and terror: a deployment of the heavenward-reaching but traditionally materialistic skyscraper form as an expression of the concerns of the spirit. In contrast to the sturdy muscularity favoured by American high-rise designers since the Great Depression, the THINK scheme had a fin-de-siècle delicacy about it—aesthetic, vast but frail, and faintly decadent. The project shrugged off truth-to-materials and other solemn pieties of the Modernist movement, or remained studiously indifferent to them. It suggested a way beyond the classic skyscraper: from a preoccupation with structure into psychology, or into an attenuated, postmodern spirituality.

While THINK gestured allusively toward Yamasaki’s Twin Towers, only a couple of the contestants dared suggest that Ground Zero needed something as mighty and imposing as the old World Trade Center. But the team that called itself United Architects—an outstanding avant-garde group that included Los Angeles architect Greg Lynn, Hollywood design firm Imaginary Forces, and Foreign Office Architects—suggested exactly that. Their plan affirmed the Modernist skyscraper’s traditional role as an immense condenser of social, technical, and visual energies, and as the biggest, boldest element in every city’s scenography. Separate at the base, the five gleaming masses that make up the project lean and bend into each other high over the ground, springing outward to form arches, combining to create enormous stacks and chimneys thrusting upward.

The visual wallop of the United Architects’ proposal sharply divided critics, some of whom saw it as attractively punchy, others as overbearing and fear-inspiring. This complex, handsome structure represents the best of Modernist skyscraper design, writ large and with high bravado. It’s declarative, determined to be an iconic American artifact in a neighbourhood of buildings with more modest ambitions, romantically eccentric, exuberant, and heroic in an era when such gestures are not in vogue.

Midcentury Modernism inspired two other projects that were especially promising contributions to architecture and architectural thought. One was by Roger Duffy, an associate of David Childs at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Duffy partnered for the occasion with landscape architects Field Operations and Tom Leader and artist Jessica Stockholder, among others. After their plans received a chilly reception in December 2009, the team withdrew from the running.

They should have stayed in. Duffy’s
The New York team’s proposal for a 1,111-foot-tall grid. Image courtesy of Richard Meier & Partners Architects

intelligent plan called for nine leaning, bending mid-sized towers rising to the same height, topped by gardens. It ignored the demand, widespread among the public, that whatever was built at Ground Zero should restore something striking to New York’s skyline. Instead, Duffy’s contribution insisted on keeping a low profile. This approach meant the scheme would hold out a welcome gesture of reconciliation to the largely mid-rise lower Manhattan neighbourhood from which the World Trade Center towers always seemed to stick out egregiously.

Despite not being popular at the time, Duffy’s design had a conceptual rigour and a confident modesty that pointed forward to new possibilities in American tall buildings. To be authoritative, for example, and to provide the large quantities of square footage demanded by big-city clients and tenants, a large building need not loom.

The project demonstrated, at least to this observer’s satisfaction, the attractiveness of breaking down a single gigantic tower into several smaller ones, and bundling these mid-sized buildings on a tight parcel of ground. It also argued against the venerable, if old-fashioned higher-is-better ambition that informs much tall-building design these days, especially that being done for cities in Asia. By the time of the 1980s, the very tall buildings going up in Singapore and Shanghai had little of their former design interest. Duffy’s scheme made the good argument that solid urbanism and impact at street level, not dramatic skyline-making, should be what tall buildings are about.

The other highly suggestive proposal came from the group formed for the purpose by Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey, Peter Eisenman, and Steven Holl. Instead of trying to touch the sky with long fingers of steel and glass, as did most designers who entered the competition, the so-called New York team proposed a grid-like composition of five massive rectilinear upright structures, each 1,111 feet tall, linked by horizontal elements several stories thick. These buildings were to stand in two perpendicular rows, forming a ninety-degree angle. Their elevations, it appears, were intended to reproduce the Manhattan street grid, as though lifted from where it lies into vertical position. The design was surely strict, imposing, and minimalist. But it drew on and refreshed the history of the midcentury skyscraper as pioneered by Mies van der Rohe — the famous box, in particular, along with the once-omnipotent grid — and the belief in the expression of structure’s plain geometry, as well as the conviction that buildings arise as mindful responses to their sites on the face of the earth. The architecture itself was refined and majestic and as intellectually aristocratic and conceptually taut as anything Mies thought up in his American years.

Each tower plan offered to resup-
For sheer imaginative power, the Innovative Design Study has not been matched in the culture of tall buildings.

ply the World Trade Center site with some architectural attribute lost on 9/11: grandeur, vertical drama, a metallic gleam in the sky over Manhattan, or mere hugeness. But all of them, memorably, also featured inventive treatments of how architecture is encountered intimately and where it fails or succeeds most tellingly: at ground level. In most IDS schemes, the bases of towers and the terrain around them are permeable and welcoming, often vast but still unmenacing. In no other aspect do the IDS proposals contrast more sharply with the less visionary work that has come since.

Perhaps the best example of this discrepancy is the Freedom Tower, for which construction officially began in 2004: a ponderous building braced for attack, corseted in glass-camouflaged anti-bomb concrete up to its twentieth storey. Child's structure is a curious, crabwise move in the historical development of skyscraper design in America. Since the birth of the tall-building form in Chicago more than a century ago, American skyscrapers have tended to exhibit ever-greater democratic openness at the base, inviting the public into a ceremonial space—a majestic lobby, a handsome banking hall—from which the shaft springs up toward heaven. The flair and sophisticated urbanism long notable in the best American skyscrapers have always begun at the ground, typically gracing the structure's rise right from the earth to the crown, through carefully calibrated changes of scale and form. By contrast, the Freedom Tower, clutching its concrete skirt anxiously around its mighty feet—as the police and "security specialists" have said it must—will, when completed, almost certainly seem frightened, reactive, and defensive—traits we have come not to expect from the American skyscraper.

With last September's announcement of what's to come next now that the Freedom Tower is under way, it appears that the various controlling interests at Ground Zero have gotten what they wanted all along: a group of large, classy, responsible, and unexciting office towers by senior, mainline architects. We should not expect much from this ensemble. The mise en scène of four very big, quite different buildings, crowded into this tight location—each piece branded by its architect's unique style and idiosyncratic moves—will almost certainly make the renovated Ground Zero seem less like an engaging new swatch of urban fabric than a boutique of luxury architecture.

The Innovative Design Study was a brilliant interruption in the architectural history that gave us the Freedom Tower. For sheer imaginative power, the event has not been matched by any comparable development in the culture of tall buildings. It is true that several beautiful tall-building proposals for American cities have captured the public imagination in recent years: Santiago Calatrava's ravishing apartment stack in New York, Renzo Piano's sleekly urban headquarters for the New York Times, and Calatrava's sensuous and graceful Fordham Spire in Chicago. The restless quest of every developer for the special something that will set a building apart in the eyes of tenants and buyers will surely summon forth many more noteworthy skyscraper designs for North American cities before the current business cycle goes south.

But precisely because they are the responses to well-known, oft-repeated economic forces, the handsome designs for tall buildings coming out of the studios these days cannot match, for daring or urgency, what resulted
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from the IDS. The tremendous pressure at that moment, and the outstanding determination of New York and the United States to rebound, made the IDS the best episode in the history of American skyscraper design since the 1950s. It was an unusually passionate tryst among an eager, engaged citizenry, an alert press throughout the world, and intelligent and astute architects working at absolute top form. In its remarkably brief life, the IDS produced ideas that will long be worth consideration.

But it was, of course, more than a design exercise. It was also a radiant example of American idealism. Americans, and especially New Yorkers, were shaken and angry, but were nevertheless feeling good about themselves: they had survived the worst attack on their native soil since the Civil War, but they were making a comeback. And as always happens at such times—for better or worse—they were feeling good about American virtue, American ideas, and the power of American ingenuity to make a rotten situation better. The surge of resolve, so apparent during the Innovative Design Study, happened, of course, before the US invasion of Iraq and the long slide into the reign of prevarications and excess most visibly represented by George Bush’s administration in Washington. Since 2003, there has been no episode in American architecture, and perhaps in American culture as a whole, more rich in ever-controversial American optimism than the IDS. For its duration, the tall building once again became for Americans what the Empire State Building had been in the grave hours of the Depression: a powerful symbol of hope, the ultimate modern expression of expansive ideas joined to huge material forces and processes, a promise of good times to come on the other side of darkness.

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