

Post-9/11 Planning: New York City and Beyond

By Tom Angotti

How should Lower Manhattan be rebuilt? Fill the gap in the New York City skyline? Or, leave it open? Create a memorial? Save the financial district? How can the city be safer and more secure from terrorist attacks?

These are the questions shaping the debates in New York City, and the rest of the country, about post-9/11 planning. The answers coming from government and business elites promote real estate development over solutions that focus on the needs of people and neighborhoods.

planning, and the planners aren't talking about the most important element—the *people* who were the victims of 9/11, and the *people* who live and work in New York City. The planning process is geared almost entirely toward developing *things*, i.e. real estate, buildings, infrastructure and capital. Commodities that can be exchanged, land that can be bought and sold—these are the fetishes of post-9/11 planning. In the meantime, there are more restrictions on *people*, especially immigrants.

The official post-9/11 response at national and local levels has had three components: military, technological and urban design. Historically each of these has failed to thwart terrorism, and each may instead encourage it.

Military. United States foreign policy was reshaped to explicitly endorse unilateral “pre-emptive” military strikes anywhere in the world the US deems appropriate. Domestic policy is to further strengthen the ability of local and federal law enforcement to detain and deport people without due process. Both responses legitimize the use of terror by the US and allied states and in the end reproduce the global disdain for US imperialism.

Technology. There is greater use of surveillance cameras, listening devices and web surveillance, as the US government invades public and private spaces. This denigrates the public character of public places (real and virtual) and strengthens the private, anti-urban character of US society. In particular, it degrades public places used by poor people.

Urban design. Physical determinism has again raised its ugly head. Planners and architects are knocking each other over to show how they can make “safe cities” and “defensible spaces.” They are advancing the myth that by rearranging *things* like buildings and roads, cities will be safe. They ignore the gaping economic and racial inequalities and the national culture of fear and violence, which are the real threats to public safety.

In December Mayor Michael Bloomberg released his plan for Lower Manhattan, and the state-created Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) unveiled a set of nine alternative designs by leading architects. At stake is how the sixteen acre World Trade Center site will be redeveloped, how and where the \$21 billion in federal and state aid will be spent and how this will affect Lower Manhattan and the rest of the region.

But the planning going on is mostly physical

POST-9/11 INEQUALITIES

The basic question in New York City is who will get the \$21 billion in federal and state aid. As if to remind us how things work in Gotham, *Forbes* predicted, “There will be windfall gains for large corporations, already powerful commercial property owners and residential landlords far from Ground Zero....” Fifteen months after 9/11, less than one-fourth of the money promised to New York has actually arrived, and most of what did go to clean up the site, subsidize businesses, underwrite bonds for new real estate development and rebuild the transportation infrastructure.

The majority of 9/11 victims lived outside New York City, as did most of the more than 125,000 people who lost their jobs. Yet plans are to concentrate the relief money in the financial district of Lower Manhattan. The investments in infrastructure and services are aimed at protecting the financial sector and creating a better environment for real estate development. Since Lower Manhattan's financial corporations are global in scope, no one knows how much of the aid they receive will end up staying in New York.

So far, the state-dominated LMDC has had all the power to make decisions about how to rebuild Lower Manhattan. Its Board of Directors (led by white males in a city where whites are a minority) monopolizes all decision-making authority. The LMDC's preference for meeting the needs of the financial and real estate sectors led it to produce six alternative proposals for the development of the World Trade Center site last year. These met with an overwhelming thumbs-down reaction from the public because the alternatives were all about building offices. The LMDC then commissioned teams of big name architects and asked them to spread the office space around a bit and throw in a little housing and some services. Their designs, released in December 2002, have again met with groans from the public, but the LMDC is determined to decide on a plan regardless of public reaction. After all, they will reason, who can question the world's most famous architects? Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently presented a more general and balanced plan for Lower Manhattan. But it, too, comes from the pinnacles of power, and no one up there is supporting a participatory planning process that goes beyond the elite set of downtown insiders.

Finally, the victims of the most glaring inequalities are getting no public attention and no relief funds. Untold numbers of immigrants who lost loved ones and their jobs on 9/11 are fearful of stepping forward to ask for assistance in the post-9/11 climate of anti-immigrant hysteria. Even documented immigrants are reluctant to step forward for fear of being apprehended as terror suspects. And only a short hop from Ground Zero is Chinatown and the Lower East Side, working-class neighborhoods whose economies were devastated by 9/11 but whose representatives have not been invited to sit in the back rooms where decisions are made. Asian Americans for Equality has initiated its own Rebuild Chinatown initiative as a means of making its voice heard. But so far the winning combination is a Wall Street address and signature architecture, not participatory planning.

The ultimate sign of neglect for the human losses due to 9/11 is the outrageous continuing denial by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that there are any significant long-

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term public health effects of the WTC disaster. Motivated more by an interest in avoiding litigation than an interest in the public welfare, the Bush Administration's EPA has failed to adequately monitor environmental impacts. It also has refused local demands to automatically test and clean inside all buildings, including those in Brooklyn and Queens where the plume of toxic smoke drifted for weeks after 9/11. A local group, 9/11 Environmental Action, with the support of elected officials, continues to press the EPA to acknowledge what many local residents and rescuers know first-hand—they are still walking around with chronic respiratory problems.

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