

A World-Class Dud

The only reason anyone would try to defend the current broken down project at Ground Zero is they don't realize there is another plan that could still restore the pre/9-11 skyline of New York by the tenth anniversary of the attacks. Since new Twin Towers are what the great majority of the American people want, and always have, and given the public's tremendous emotional and financial investment, it would take a very compelling reason to honorably override that. Instead, as becomes clearer all the time, the deeply disappointing official plan isn't even a consolation prize. It is a world-class dud.

Most Americans don't know that there is an extraordinary alternative. The *Twin Towers II* plan includes spectacular, reengineered Twin Towers beside an uplifting 9/11 memorial that would cost a fraction of the depressing "Reflecting Absence." Unlike the current memorial, it has strong 9/11 family member support. The beautifully landscaped project would include retail storefronts and restaurants, built at grade level to integrate it into the neighborhood.

Repositioned within the protected "superblock," the new Twin Towers would feature soaring sun-drenched lobbies, rather than the paranoid atmosphere of the windowless "Freedom Tower." The first sixty floors above the six-story lobbies would form the commercial bases, with 40" wide floor-to-ceiling windows. Then, in each tower, from the 67th floor skypark to the skylit roof, some of the most desirable residences, corporate suites, and public spaces in the world would encircle a forty-story atrium. The flexibility and excitement of the mixed-use plan would greatly enhance the prospects for New York's struggling business environment instead of siphoning off its vitality.

The superiority of the plan has been recognized by some of the world's most eminent skyscraper engineers. Everyone who has seen the half-million dollar ten-foot presentation model has been won over by the esthetically pleasing, elegantly practical, and emotionally satisfying solution that the reimaged Twin Towers represent. The model was fabricated using a fully developed set of blueprints – the fruit of the collaboration between a well-respected structural engineer and his mentor, who had been an architect on the original WTC.

The transition would be smooth because much of the work that has been done at the site had to be done for either plan – and a significant portion of the rest could be retrofitted. Of course, it wouldn't hurt that construction workers would be building what they have wanted to build since 9/11/2001. It is most likely that contracts and procurements could be converted on preferential terms because no one would want to stand in the way of a project that so quintessentially captures the American spirit.

The economy of building one tower twice, instead of four towers with dozens of unique floorplates is evident and would offset any of the waste of the false start. Once built, it would result in a far more profitable development. Add to the savings the hundreds of millions that would not be spent on the morbid memorial and the hundreds of millions that won't be needed to run it. On top of that put the billions of dollars that wouldn't be spent on what a *New York Times* review recently termed the "fatally flawed" transit hub.

But the greatest reward would come in the inspiring reassurance that we, the American people, have the guts and the faith in ourselves to make the very best out of the very worst. That is what we owe those who died on September 11, 2001 – nothing less.

Blaming the financial downturn for the current woes is a smelly red herring. The project only attracted one private tenant when the markets were thriving. If it were a private development it would have been canned years ago. The Port Authority's proposal to put two retail stumps in place of the only two towers of the four that have any distinction shows that it is unfit for this endeavor. If the whole project is fatally flawed, as there is good reason to believe it is, then no amount of tinkering will fix it and it would be throwing more good money after bad to try.

But the prevailing financial gloom does mean that the only way *anything* will be built is by pouring more public dollars into it. So it would be a welcome change if the public finally had something to show for all the billions that keep getting sucked into corporate black holes. If the President wants to rebuild America, then let it begin here.

The Federal government is going to send billions of dollars in stimulus money to New York and New Jersey. Why shouldn't New York and New Jersey give the people something in return? If the two states relinquish the air-rights over the 16 acres in Lower Manhattan it would become a national holding, which the site already is in everything but the title. The states would be relieved of the burden to rebuild, which they are clearly not equipped to do, and would get in return the cash they need in their current distress. The Port Authority could develop an appropriate transit hub and then turn its attention to building a stunning Moynihan Station, instead of the funereal "Freedom Tower."

With our blessings, for once, the government would pledge all the upfront costs to get the Twin Towers built without delay. It could then sell the right to build *Twin Towers II* to a private consortium – headed by Larry Silverstein, if he chooses. While the consortium is being funded, the government would underwrite all of the costs, so not a moment would be wasted. To the degree that the project is privately funded the public would be relieved of the cost, but to the degree the public is a stakeholder, it would reap the rewards of the certain success.

Much better yet, the Federal government could form a public corporation that would allow the people to buy shares in the new World Trade Center. That would be the most fitting joint venture imaginable.

If it is darkest before the dawn, then a new day may finally be breaking at the World Trade Center. The current failure at the site is so pervasive that the way out would be as dramatic as night and day. At the end of January, Port Authority Executive Director Christopher Ward rejected on national television the idea that the components of the official plan could be looked at outside the framework of one united project. If that is true then it supports the inevitable conclusion is that the whole sorry mess should be scrapped and replaced with *Twin Towers II*. A recent MSNBC online poll found support for that option running at over 90%.

The outcome of Mayor Bloomberg's summit will rest on how committed the parties are to a real solution as opposed to mere crisis management. If the last seven years tells us anything, it is that nothing good will *ever* come from building on flawed assumptions and faulty priorities.

If officials simply want to make the best of a bad situation, than we are in for a pitiful World Trade Center – one that will be a permanent blight on the city and stain on the nation. But that does not have to be our fate. If we can finally get past what one *New York Times* column recently referred to as “the byzantine politics of ground zero,” then there is very good reason to get excited about the prospects for a magnificent Trade Center that will be a credit to our country at last and worthy of those who paid the ultimate price.

If Mayor Bloomberg keeps the business model at the forefront of the agenda, then all the underlying so-called “imperatives,” such as running the pre-WTC streets through the site, will be examined without prejudice to see how they hold up. Progress at the site has been crippled by an unwillingness to prioritize. The task now is not to justify an untenable position, but to find the best way out of it.

It is time to stop treating the billion-dollar-plus National 9/11 Memorial as if it were a sacred cow. After all, it is no accident that only one private tenant has leased office space after so many years. Why would any company choose to become part of a complex where the main focus is on two depressing voids in a bland suburban setting?

Nothing can stop an idea whose time has come. The focus must not be on finding fault, but on finding a solution. We suffered a massive national concussion of 9/11 – but we are not brain-dead. Why would officials want to continue trying to jam a square peg into a round hole when there is such a promising alternative?