

Tower Foundations: An Interview with Daniel Libeskind

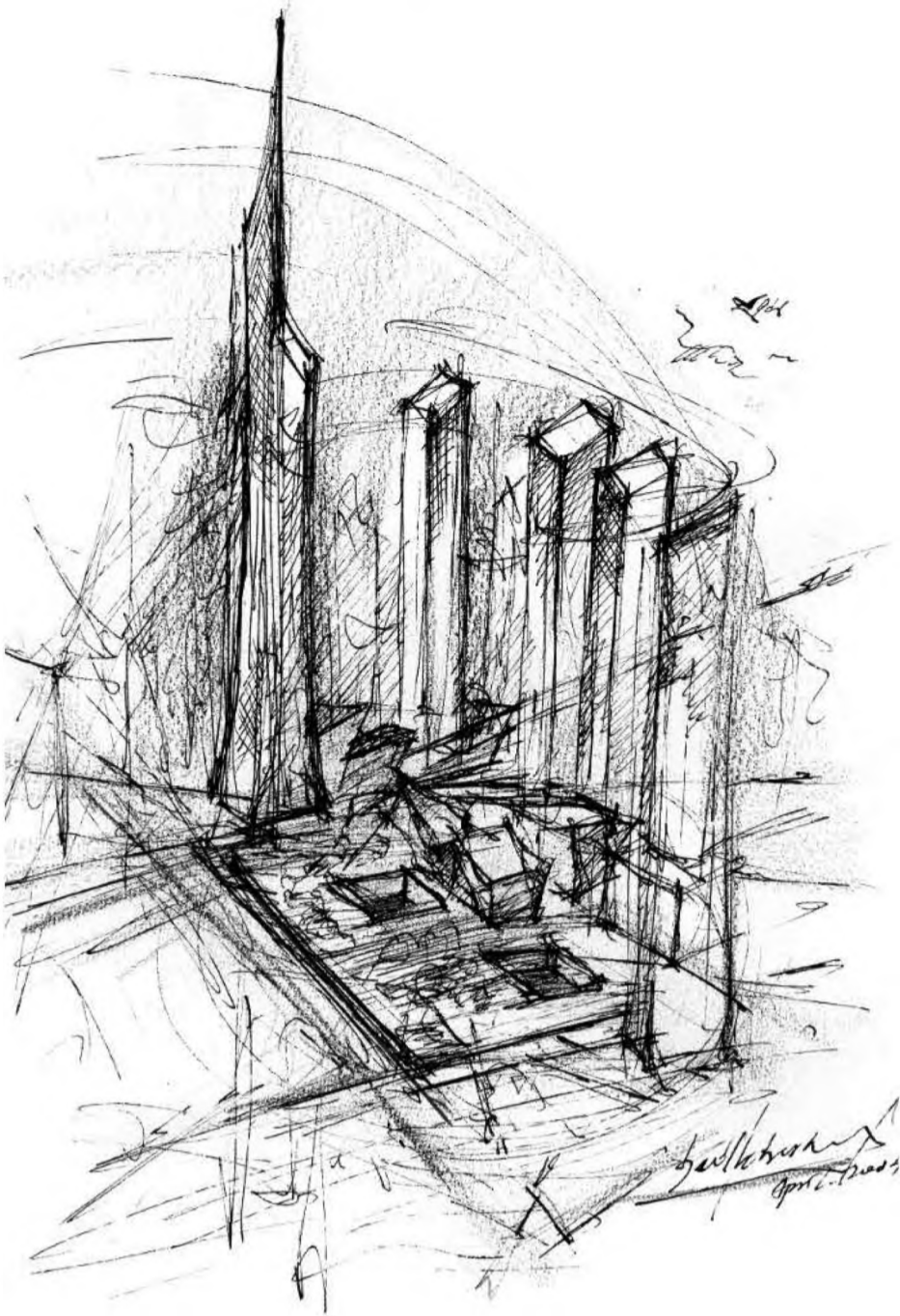
Since 2003, the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan has largely been a construction zone. As of today, seven of the nine buildings proposed in Studio Libeskind's master plan have been completed, and urban life has returned to the neighborhood. In August, I sat with Daniel Libeskind in his office, just a few blocks from the site, to take stock of what has been achieved over the past 15 years and to project what will happen in the years to come.

DOUGLAS HARTIG: After the tragedy on September 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center, many called the devastated area Ground Zero. How do you think of the site today, given all of the political, social, and technological changes of the past 15 years?

DANIEL LIBESKIND: Well, it's an amazing development given that it was a site of complete destruction, a kind of void in the center of Lower Manhattan. When my wife and I moved here after the competition, almost all of the high-rise buildings were empty. Nobody wanted to be here. Actually, many people believed that Lower Manhattan would never come back to life. And in fact, as you may remember, the mayor at that time didn't even want any tall buildings to be built around the site. There was a lot of skepticism. As I walk through the site, as I have watched it for the last 15 years, it's been an amazing affirmation of life. It's exactly what I set out to do, which was to create a plan that is not merely symbolic but that really transforms this area. Since I started working on it, almost a quarter of a million people have moved to Lower Manhattan, just around the site. A lot of Grade B office buildings have been transformed into residential. There are schools, apartment buildings, hotels, and retail. It's really, for the next 30 years, I believe, the new center of New York.

DH: Would you still call the site Ground Zero?

DL: Well, Ground Zero is the name that stuck there. But it's a new social space. In my scheme, out of the 16 acres, which



Studio Libeskind, Memory Foundations, World Trade Center master plan, design study sketch, New York. © Daniel Libeskind. All images courtesy the architect.

is really not a lot, eight acres are devoted to public space. My aim was to expand and give back to people badly needed public space, especially in Lower Manhattan. I think that has really been the impetus and a magnet for the development. It's not just that there's a memorial, but that there are streets with connections to Tribeca, to Chinatown, to Wall Street, and to Battery Park that have created a different sense of being able to live here. I think that's a major achievement.

DH: In those 15 years, have we healed as a nation from that tragedy?

DL: No, I think that day changed the world. It changed everything about everybody. We travel in different ways with security – everything has been transformed by that event. I always said there might be military

responses and political responses, but in terms of architecture, constructing something was probably the biggest positive response because it had to do with people. It had to do with practicality, not just transportation, connectivity, and place, but to affirm that New York would never forget while not succumbing to pessimism. Creating a balance between remembering and moving forward was one of the biggest challenges of the plan.

DH: Do you think that architecture can truly heal the World Trade Center site?

DL: I think it can, if the word *healing* is used not in a sort of metaphysical way but in a simple way – that people can get jobs, they can go to work, they can have beautiful streets, they can enjoy the Hudson River. When I designed it, I thought always of my parents, who were factory workers. My father worked as a printer right there on Stone Street. I always asked myself, what do regular New Yorkers get from this site? Most will never work in those beautiful office buildings. They won't be in the Condé Nast or Time Magazine offices there. Where will they be? They will be on the streets of New York, in the subways, and trying to feed their families. What do they get? I always thought they should get the streets and places that have meaning.

Many people often look at a master plan by concentrating on buildings. Is this building a nice building? Is it the perfect building? But my intention from the very beginning was really to design a fabric that links things and gives people a sense of unity. I think the site does that. I walk past it almost every day, back and forth from where I live. It's really an amazing development. Twenty-five million people a year visit the site and it's not even completed. The museum itself has millions of visitors even though admission is not free. Millions of people come in, not just tourists, but New Yorkers, so it has definitely

changed the way the city is seen. In that sense I think it's healing. It's a different kind of city, a rebirth of the city.

DH: Do you think that the ways people interact with the site 15 years from now will be about the same as they do today, or do you think it'll be transformed?

DL: Things change all the time as generations come and go. One has to have the long-range view of the site. The 1,776-foot height of Tower One, the Freedom Tower, is a symbolic height that represents the year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The building stands in the Manhattan grid but in a way that echoes the torch of the Statue of Liberty. Those are American values no matter what the political rhetoric is today coming out of Washington. This is about America, it's about New York, and it always will be.

DH: Are you saying that the site won't be absorbed into the city entirely but will be a unique precinct with its own character for many, many years?

DL: I think it will. It will always resonate with what happened. It will never be Times Square. It's the true memorial site, but a memorial in a very different way, even though the tower footprints are gigantic, the waterfalls, the names. There is a sense, in time, that it's not about what it was when it first opened, which was very solemn. Now you see people walking and interacting, people playing Frisbee, without banalizing the memory because it's there as an actual spatial construct. It's very deep because it goes all the way to the bedrock. That's something very special, you know. There has never really been public access to bedrock and the slurry walls, which now gives people a sense of the entire site constellation, from the past into the future.



Studio Libeskind, Memory Foundations, World Trade Center master plan, rendered view of site, New York, 2002. © Archimation, 2002.

DH: Your first scheme, in 2002, for the World Trade Center site was called Memory Foundations. As the site has developed, is it still aligned with that idea?

DL: Definitely. You have to remember something. The competition was for eight weeks or something. Then the project has to develop. It has to work for all the stakeholders. Let's not forget who the stakeholders are. It's not just one. You've got the Port Authority that leases the land to private developers and their own architects. You've got the families of the victims who are really at the ground level of stakeholder, the thousands and thousands of people who lost their loved ones – brothers, sisters, mothers, uncles, cousins. You've got the governors of New York and New Jersey, two very powerful politicians controlling the Port Authority.

You've got the mayor of New York City, who controls what happens on the streets. You've got the PATH authorities controlling the [commuter] trains and the MTA controlling the subways underneath the site. And that's just the beginning of it. The task was to forge a consensus to allow the project to move forward. Historically, most master plans are never realized. They are drawings that wind up in museums or archives. But I was very practical here in terms of dividing the site into discrete segments of tall buildings that would be built as the economy allowed them to be built. You see that Tower Two is not yet realized. Tower One, Three, and Four are built, and Two will be built because the foundations are there for it, and the performing arts center is just under construction. Really, it is unbelievable that it is so close to the original concept given all the forces of development in the city.

DH: How much of your master plan is intact and how much of it is a result of compromise?

DL: There are inevitable compromises because you have to adjust everything to all the different issues. I call it a Rubik's Cube. There's nothing you can do for one square inch of that territory without affecting everything else. Little do people know how much conflict there was over every inch of that site. I often worked for months on things that seem to have no glory at all, like increasing the sidewalk by three inches in width. It's one of the most difficult things to do in the world, to convince people to increase the size of the sidewalk. You would think it's very easy but it's probably one of the most contentious issues in terms of traffic, city, and state authorities, West Street is a federal highway as well. Given the hurdles, it's very close to my intent. It has developed in a good way.

I want to point out that many people don't understand what a master plan even is. It's very abstract. They know an aesthetic of a building and how to analyze it, but what is a master plan? I always compare it to a piece of music, a composition of notes and lines, but very precise and very synthetic. Incredibly precise – it cannot be off even by a single vibration, otherwise it's the wrong tune. And then that piece has to be given over to performers, not the composer or the conductor. The performers have to have a margin of interpretability. Otherwise it's just mechanical music that sounds like a machine. You have to enable the participant to have that freedom, but at the same time you have to be able to conduct it in a way that all those pieces interlock. A master plan is the same. It's hard for people to visualize what it is. It's a piece of a city that you're building, not a building or a park or a memorial or a museum. You're building an entire structure that has to be incredibly precise because somebody has to follow those lines in digging the foundations.

DH: You didn't close off West Street entirely, you made it porous. How did you envision the porosity of the site?

DL: I had ideas that could not be realized because of security concerns. I proposed a tunnel for West Street so that there would be a plaza above, not the highway that it is now. I thought that the more you can connect the site to the Hudson River, the more you can make a neighborhood there and not think about it as big, impressive buildings but as a harmonious social space that could also impact the context. The larger context has been impacted amazingly. What used to be just Grade B office buildings are now residential, and that has had a big impact on the 10 million square feet of new office space, five million square feet of infrastructure, and five million [square

feet] of culture. I often point out to people that it's the downtown of a major American city, but what's in it is equivalent to an entire city in itself. That's hard to make clear because of the complexity of what a master plan is in a city like New York.

DH: What has been your role in the selection of architects and landscape architects?

DL: None. I don't have any role. I can advise the Port Authority and the city, but it's not a public project. There are private investors with their own architects. Insofar as the memorial, I had a large role, working on the visitor's building and the memorial itself, with architects and landscape designers of the project, because that was the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. There were early struggles – it was very fraught in the beginning – and huge differences between people and what they wanted to do. For example, the developers wanted to put the tallest tower close to Wall Street and I wanted to put it as far away from Wall Street as possible. You can imagine that gaining consensus was probably one of the hardest things to achieve here. I'm very proud that, despite all these struggles, looking back at it, people actually worked well together.

DH: Are you still actively involved in the site development or has the execution of the master plan been absorbed by Silverstein's development company?

DL: No, he's only in charge of his sites. He's not in charge of the whole master plan, that's the city and Port Authority. But I'm involved in what Tower Two will be, and I was involved in the siting and realization of the performing arts center because of the complex infrastructure on which it is sitting. What you see on the ground is actually the easy part of that project. It's what's happening

80 feet down, which deals with security, infrastructure, and foundations. That's the art of the master plan, because that all had to be built before you saw a single building emerge. If you look from a drone or an airplane you will see that Tower Two has a very specific footprint because on the south side it's also responding to the Wedge of Light, which is a plaza that is not completely realized because it's still missing its north corner.

DH: So you are still involved in some ways?

DL: Absolutely! I said that I would outlast all the governors, all the mayors, all the heads of the Port Authority, all the architects who work there, even all the developers. And I have done so.

DH: Were you actively engaged in selecting the architect for Tower Two?

DL: No, that's not my purview, it's the purview of the developers. But I'm certainly involved in the approval of what is suggested and what is getting built, making sure that it's aligned perfectly with the master plan. A master plan is not a metaphor, it's a structural document that is not just some lines on paper but a spatial 3-D plan. It's very important that a master plan does not just say put a building here, put a building there. It has to do with the size of the footprint, the height of the building, the location of the building, and in a very precise plan, the sustainability of the building. We wrote all sorts of sustainability criteria for these new buildings, which not only have new security prerogatives but also energy efficiencies with smaller carbon footprints than the buildings around them.

DH: One aspect of your master plan that didn't get realized is the vertical garden concept. Do you think vertical gardens could still be employed at the site?

DL: It could be incorporated in Tower Two. That was my first idea, and maybe I was the first person, back in 2003, to suggest that the buildings should have vertical gardens. It wasn't a frivolous idea. It was the idea that we need high-rise buildings with gardens. Luckily for me, the idea has caught on elsewhere. Almost everywhere in the world now, gardens are no longer considered a kind of luxury – you need them for creating a better environment for people in high-density cities. So yes, that's an aspect that I'm very interested in, and I hope that by the time Tower Two is built it will have gardens.

DH: When you presented the scheme you said it was inspired by the torch of the Statue of Liberty. Is that still the symbolism of the site as built?

DL: It is. If you see the towers from a distance, you see the incremental vertical rise toward Tower One. Even though they stand in the city grid, they have a slight torque toward the memorial. You see that there is no retail on the Greenwich Street side, toward the memorial. The retail is concentrated on Church Street and elsewhere, toward Broadway. So there is, I think, a very practical balance between the sense of what the site is as a site, which will always be a site of memory and of change in the world, and the site that is practical. You can build it as the economy allows. Judging by the response of the public, it has been very successful.

DH: What do you think those who arrive at our shores see in the symbolism?

DL: It says don't just listen to the rhetoric coming from people who are anti-immigration, who don't believe in America as founded on diversity, and a quest for liberty and social justice. The site represents that. First of all, it's a site for people, it's not filled with

buildings. The center is not two large towers or megastructures, it's open. And when you go on any given day and see the diversity of people there, from New York and from around the world, you see that it's true. It's not just an idea, it has been realized.

DH: Does its symbolism reflect the past or speak to the future?

DL: I think both. You could not have a future without the past. And in this case, the past is the foundation. Memory Foundations, which you referred to, was the idea in my original master plan and it is still there. In a literal way, the foundations are standing in that memorable space.

DH: Given everything that's happened in the past 15 years, if you could change one thing or one decision, what would it be?

DL: I would love to have implemented the tunnel for West Street. That didn't happen because people in the new buildings northwest of the site thought that if a bomb went off it would affect them. Who knows? There were so many different ideas about security that the project itself was put on hold for one year because of disagreements between the New York City police, federal authorities, firemen, state police, and so on. Security is a very, very sensitive and important issue. You know, when you do a master plan you're laying foundations for the future in every possible way. It's not a lighthearted game of geometry. It's how to combine a vision, which is profoundly spiritual about what a public site is, and practicality – how can it be achieved? It's not just a fantasy that remains in a drawing. I think that's the miracle of New York, because if I were to tell somebody this back then, 15 years ago, they would have just laughed.

New York, despite its obvious tensions, is a city where people are together. And



Studio Libeskind, Memory Foundations, World Trade Center master plan, skyline rendering, New York, 2002. © Studio Libeskind.

to me, that's the greatest achievement of American democracy. This was not a project from the top down. Often, in those darker days, when it first began, people would say to me, *Wouldn't you rather work in China where someone just says do it and you do a grand project, and in five years it's all done and it's exactly as you wanted it?* I said no! I think the fraught project in a democracy, with all its different voices and tensions, makes the project real. Compare it to the original Twin Towers, a project done from the top down. Nobody knew what it was. Nobody wanted it. It just happened one day. The Twin Towers literally landed from outer space. The original plaza had to be closed in the winter because it was inaccessible due to the winds. It was deserted at night. Nobody wanted to be there. So I always thought, this is a chance to improve New York, to make New York a better city.

DH: It sounds like your well-known enthusiasm for architecture is evinced in the site. It doesn't seem like you have any what-ifs or laments.

DL: No, no, because architecture and planning are the nonexperimental fields. You can be experimental in music, you can write an experimental novel, you can make an experimental performance or film. But when it comes to building something this complex, the design cannot be an experiment. It must be a well-tested, empirical reality, otherwise it will never happen. That's why plans for so many cities never happened. Because they were like experimental artworks.

DH: You've said that architecture today is experiencing a renaissance. How is this evidenced at the World Trade Center site?

DL: Well it's evidenced by people's interest. Nobody said that people should go there in the millions, and had it been just a regular memorial with some big office buildings in the center, I think people would not have come. I think there's a renaissance because, globally, people are interested in cities and in interesting places. And this is not an orthodox place, it's an unusual place in every way. It's unusual, in any city, to have a connection to memory that also develops a sense of something new.

DH: Is this sense of a renaissance different in New York than it is in Europe or Asia?

DL: No, I think it's global. I think people have rediscovered that cities are not luxuries, that they need cities, that the world will not survive if we just continue exploiting nature and building indiscriminately. There's got to be a new idea of the future. Today there's a return to the creativity of the city. I think that's something that began globally with Ground Zero, because it was kind of a gong for the public. Originally there was no competition for the site. They had invited local architects to give them different ideas, and the Port Authority was going to decide, just kind of do their own thing. But the public interest in the site, by the people of New York, and even globally, drove the Port Authority to places they never thought they would go to implement a scheme. That was not their original idea at all. The design study was not even called a competition. It showed the mobilization of public interest. But people don't stay interested forever in a master plan. As long as people are interested, a project is protected. The minute the public loses interest, the politicians and others take over. That's inevitable in any city, but it was a very interesting phenomenon here.

DH: Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to say about your role in

the project now or anything else you'd like to add?

DL: When I said in the beginning, many years ago, that I'll outlast all of these politicians and governors, it's actually true. I'm virtually the only one remaining who knows the history of the site because new people have come in. That's the nature of a long-term project. But it's kind of interesting to contemplate because, unlike a building or a large project, you have to have true faith to do a project like this. You can't just do it by your mood. You have to be a marathon runner. I'm a believer in New York and a believer in struggle. You don't get everything you want, there are compromises. But compromise is not a dirty word. It's not the aggressive one who is the winner, it's those who are able to cooperate. I would have never expected all these characters to come together with such solidarity to do something good on this site. It might not be perfect, but it's a far cry from what people thought it would be, and it's pretty close to the intent, absolutely.

Douglas Hartig is an architect and a Master's of Science in Critical, Curatorial, and Conceptual Practices in Architecture candidate at Columbia University.