

A Civic Assessment of the Lower Manhattan Planning Process

A Regional Plan Association Report to the Civic Alliance

Executive Summary
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Introduction

An extraordinary mood of collaboration, unanimity of purpose and shared responsibility characterized the spontaneous coalescing of the civic community in the weeks and months following 9/11. In conference rooms and university classrooms, crowds of planning and design professionals, community advocates, union representatives, public officials and others came together week after week to discuss the principles and goals that should guide the planning and rebuilding process for Lower Manhattan. From this discussion a handful of coalitions and projects emerged, each with a slightly different focus or niche, but all with the goal of “raising the bar” about what to expect for the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan. Some of the most prominent groups and projects included the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, New York New Visions, Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R.Dot), the Labor Community Advocacy Network (LCAN) and Imagine New York, who each published reports and position statements in the fall and spring of 2001-2002 that helped to shape the direction and objectives for the rebuilding process.

The strongest and most clearly supported sentiment that emerged from this process, culled from hundreds of years of collective planning experience of the diverse group of professionals who took part in these efforts, was that rebuilding after September 11 – particularly because of the unprecedented and tragic nature of this unique challenge – needs to be unsurpassed in its public participation, transparency and accountability to the public. This was the overriding theme of civic efforts, and was in part self-actualized by the outpouring of work by the civic community that framed the planning process even before the public agency charged with overseeing the rebuilding—the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC)—was created.

Precisely because of the outpouring of people’s time and concern and dedication to the task of rebuilding in the fall and winter of 2001-2002, there were great expectations about what the rebuilding process could achieve. Specifically we wondered: what can a planning process achieve when an entire city of professionals, officials, advocates (and sometimes adversaries) unites behind one goal? The first three years of the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan provide the best case study from which to answer that question.

The Civic Alliance’s September 2002 *Planning Framework*, which forms the basis for this retrospective report, was written as a consensus document of the Civic Alliance after a series of eight meetings each exploring an aspect of the rebuilding process in turn. It is an apt point of reference because it flows from the contributions and input of a very broad range of organizations involved in the rebuilding process for Lower Manhattan. Released in draft for the Regional Plan Association’s 2002 Regional Assembly, which drew about six hundred people to discuss the content of the report, it was revised in the following months after the extensive input of the working groups of the Civic Alliance. Its thoroughly-vetted recommendations largely represented the consensus of the civic community and the high hopes and expectations for this vital planning responsibility.

The purpose of this *Assessment* report is to evaluate the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan in light of the goals set out for it at the outset of the planning process by the civic community. It is not meant as a critique of a single agency, entity, or group of actors, but of the entire rebuilding process that has been formed from a complex interplay of people, policies, timing, politics, and tragedy. The report chooses as a benchmark the goals of the civic community because they represent a hopeful and prospective framework for the rebuilding that captures the mood and expectations of the period in which they were drafted. While some of the goals may no longer seem current, a surprising amount of the recommendations are still very relevant, and continue to guide the civic desires for the direction of the rebuilding. As this process moves forward at the third anniversary of September 11, this report highlights the successes, failures and the opportunities that still exist to realize the potential handed to us in tragedy to remake a district, city and region for the better.

Background

Regional Plan Association (RPA) offers this assessment of how the rebuilding process has measured up against the goals of the civic community for consideration and discussion by its peers in the Civic Alliance. It is intended to help guide the advocacy agenda of the civic community moving forward and to point to areas of opportunity and priority for its efforts. Following the issuance of this report, the Civic Alliance will meet to frame its policy agenda for the coming year and set goals to be met before the next anniversary of 9/11.

In preparing this report, RPA has drawn on its experience of convening and staffing the Civic Alliance since shortly after 9/11, and its extensive involvement in leading efforts to promote public participation in the rebuilding process with its Civic Alliance partners. The views expressed in the paper are those of RPA, but are influenced by its extensive experience working with the members of the Civic Alliance and by input of Civic Alliance members specifically on this report. The input and comments of the general public are also considered, gathered from the Civic Alliance's many public participation events it has sponsored since 9/11, such as two "Listening to the City" forums in February and July of 2002, the "How Can \$1.2 Billion best Revitalize New York After 9/11?" public workshop in March 2004, and numerous public panel discussions that were hosted by different organizations as part of the "Beyond 16 Acres" series, on topics ranging from housing to green buildings to Chinatown.

RPA wishes to thank its partners in the Civic Alliance who have donated many hours of their time to promote the goal of a sustainable and equitably rebuilt Lower Manhattan and who believe in the importance of having the civic community come together and stay together to promote public participation and accountability in the process. RPA also wishes to acknowledge the hard work of the public agencies and civil servants who face the daunting task of executing the rebuilding agenda, and for their unwavering professionalism and dedication since 9/11. Specifically, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the City of New York and the State of the New York are to be commended for their extraordinary efforts.

Major Findings and Recommendations

The high expectations of the civic community for the rebuilding process have yet to be realized by the official policies and actions guiding the rebuilding and recovery of Lower Manhattan. While the rebuilding process has responded to several major civic-supported recommendations—in particular, restoring and expanding Lower Manhattan’s transportation infrastructure and connections to the region—it has neglected many other recommended strategies. Most importantly, none of the official planning efforts to date have seriously considered the recommendation to change the program for the WTC site by introducing a more diverse mix of uses or reducing the amount of commercial office space located on the site. Other civic recommendations to diversify Lower Manhattan’s economy, provide a range of housing options, and lead the City and Nation in pioneering environmental sustainability and green building design, have largely been neglected. Below, the major findings and recommendations of the report are detailed.

- 1. The Port Authority, New York City, New York State and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority repaired and restored Lower Manhattan’s infrastructure and public spaces with unprecedented speed and efficiency.** Subway and PATH service were restored and the Trade Center site was cleaned up far earlier than nearly anyone anticipated. Business owners, landlords, workers, residents and volunteers also contributed greatly to restoring Lower Manhattan as a functioning business district and residential community.
- 2. Several exemplary projects have resulted from the rebuilding effort and should help restore Lower Manhattan’s vibrancy as they are implemented.** Mayor Bloomberg’s Vision for Lower Manhattan and the LMDC’s selection of the Studio Libeskind Master Plan for the World Trade Center site provided the blueprints for the direction of off-site and on-site planning. The Port Authority’s selection of Santiago Calatrava’s inspiring design for a new PATH station and the MTA’s planning and design for the Fulton Street Transit Center should change the image of Lower Manhattan.
- 3. The commitment to incorporate public input in the planning process, while laudable in some instances, has been uneven over time and across subject areas. In many cases public agencies have failed to follow through on public input received.** While extensive opportunities were provided for public input into planning decisions for the World Trade Center site by the LMDC at the beginning of the process, the follow-through and responsiveness to that input has been less successful. One example is the overwhelming comment of participants at “Listening to the City” that plans for the World Trade Center site were too dense, too dominated by office space, and too boring. Yet an office space program of ten million square feet continues to shape the World Trade Center master plan, despite lack of funding, unsupportive market conditions and a united civic community calling for a different approach.

- 4. Major challenges and uncertainties underlie the current direction of planning for the World Trade Center site. The implementation of design excellence is not assured, as Libeskind's Master Plan has been stripped and design guidelines languish in negotiation.**
 - Despite economic uncertainty, high office vacancy rates, and reduced insurance money available for rebuilding, plans to build 10 million square feet of office space continue to define the World Trade Center Master Plan. Major phasing and implementation questions are raised by this approach.
 - The latest General Project Plan (GPP) lacks the detailed attention to the public realm of the Libeskind Master Plan, the thorough integration of memorial elements with the entire site, or sufficient detail to express a common design theme. Implementation of these essential elements will thus fall to the WTC Commercial Design Guidelines for the site, which are being stalled by negotiations between the developer and public agencies, and have yet to be vetted with the public.

- 5. Economic initiatives to date have not supported the diversification of Lower Manhattan's economy, nor they do they promote a range of housing options that would encourage a socially, economically and racially diverse residential community.**
 - The emphasis of public policies towards creating large amounts of office space in Lower Manhattan does not offer sufficient flexibility to support the growth of a more diverse array of sectors of Lower Manhattan's economy. Successful commercial business districts must provide a wide range of amenities – including attractive housing, cultural institutions, civic spaces and public facilities – to attract a diverse and talented workforce. And in the economic downturn following 9/11, no public policies have specifically outlined a strategy for the immediate creation of jobs.
 - While Lower Manhattan added over 6,500 units of housing below Canal Street since the year 2000, little or none of it was affordable to low and moderate income families. The Liberty Bond program has contributed to the creation of market-rate and luxury housing, but has created no affordable housing in Lower Manhattan. Only \$50 million in CDBG funds has been announced by the LMDC to create 300 units of middle-income housing in Lower Manhattan. Existing affordable housing from the Lower East Side to Chinatown to Tribeca is at risk of being lost to expiring public subsidies and gentrification pressures.

- 6. Efforts to build Lower Manhattan's civic amenities to create a more attractive and livable community, as articulated in the Mayor's "Vision for Lower Manhattan," are lagging.**

The importance of implementing civic amenities, open space and waterfront access improvements throughout the district, and better connecting the diverse communities of Lower Manhattan is key to creating a vital 24/7 community and an increased quality of life. While off-site planning studies to this end are underway or completed, no funds have been committed to their implementation, even as the remaining \$869 million CDBG funds are being allocated to other priorities.

- 7. The success of the “Reflecting Absence” memorial design is greatly dependent on integration with the overall master plan for the site, and logistical, funding and maintenance issues that are in development. The cultural program for the site, while promising, is also highly dependent on funding and implementation issues, and has not benefited from sufficient public input.**

While public response to the selected memorial design can best be described as lukewarm, it satisfies some parties’ hope of reconnecting the memorial site with the surrounding neighborhood by creating an at-grade plaza. Logistical, programmatic, maintenance and sustainable design issues will largely determine whether the memorial can succeed as a public place that simultaneously provides a meaningful tribute to those who lost their lives and can accommodate millions of visitors a year.

- 8. While individual buildings on the WTC Site will meet a minimum threshold of environmentally sustainable design, they will be upstaged by other projects in the City that are demonstrating greater levels of environmental innovation and sustainability.**

The creation of WTC Sustainable Design Guidelines by the LMDC and the Port Authority is commendable; but they direct WTC development to follow, rather than lead City-wide efforts to implement sustainable design. The LEED¹ Gold-rated Solaire residential building in Battery Park City represents a higher standard of environmental design than the highest level aimed for in the World Trade Center Sustainable guidelines. Also, the planned Bank of America building at One Bryant Park will aim for the first LEED Platinum rating for a high rise building, setting a nationwide example.

Recommendations

Significant opportunities still exist to achieve the model 21st Century City envisioned by the civic community after 9/11, which would promote a sustainable and equitable economy throughout Lower Manhattan over the long term. This report offers the following recommendations for consideration by policy makers, the civic community and the public.

¹ The U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) guidelines provide an independent rating system for green buildings. The achievable levels are: certified, silver-certified, gold-certified, and platinum-certified. The WTC Sustainable Guidelines, if followed, would help buildings achieve the certified or silver-certified level.

1. Improve opportunities for civic and public participation in several critical areas of the rebuilding process by implementing the following steps.

- a. Release draft **WTC Design Guidelines** to the public for input; designate an administrator of the guidelines and a review board for proposed changes. Set a target date for the design guidelines' adoption. This recommendation should be implemented by the LMDC in partnership with the Port Authority.
- b. Develop a draft timeline for the allocation of the remaining **CDBG funding**, including a list of all projects and initiatives under review to be funded. Specify guidelines for how outside groups seeking funding may apply to receive the remaining funds. This recommendation should be implemented by the LMDC, in partnership with City agencies conducting studies that might be implemented with remaining CDBG funds.
- c. Open the process for developing and refining the **cultural program** for the WTC site to public input, in order to test ideas, gather feedback, and build broader support, understanding and buy-in for these important and promising activities on the site. This should be implemented by the LMDC.
- d. Design a process for public review of the refined programmatic and physical plans for the **WTC Memorial** design, when it is completed by consultants. This process should be conducted by the LMDC.

2. In light of limited funding for the rebuilding of the WTC site, an uncertain economic outlook and sluggish office demand, reexamine the leaseholder agreement and the program for the World Trade Center site, considering available public and private resources for development.

Then, develop a strategy for World Trade Center Tower Footprints 2, 3, 4, and 5 to more accurately reflect market demand and potential phasing. Three alternative strategies are recommended in this regard:

- a. Explore different program options for these sites, such as housing, hotel/hospitality, and an expanded civic and cultural program, or other uses that could be developed right away.
- b. Immediately develop a plan for building tower "pedestals" that would house retail and possibly civic or cultural uses in the interim period between now and when office space demand can support the development of the site.
- c. Work with artists to create temporary installations of public art on the building sites, similar to the "Art on the Beach" program of the 1980s that originally inhabited the landfill that now is home to Battery Park City.

These strategies must be considered jointly by the Port Authority, LMDC, City of New York and Silverstein Properties.

3. Develop a plan to meet Mayor Bloomberg's 2002 target of creating 2,000 units of housing affordable to low and middle-income households in Lower Manhattan.
The City should work jointly with the LMDC to achieve this goal.

4. Broaden Lower Manhattan's economic development strategy to grow new sectors and diversify Lower Manhattan's economy.

- a. In addition to building high-end, high-performance office space, Lower Manhattan's economic development strategy should remain flexible to support the growth of broad sectors that would contribute to a more sustainable, diverse and equitable economy. Part of this strategy should be to provide adequate job training in sectors with potential for growth, and to use public policies to promote the creation of career-oriented jobs.

This strategy should be addressed jointly by the City, the LMDC and Lower Manhattan business industry leaders.

5. Place greater priority on creating civic amenities by expediting off-site planning studies, seeking public input, and estimating implementation costs.

- a. A street management plan for Lower Manhattan is essential to connecting the diverse neighborhoods of Lower Manhattan, serving businesses, reducing the risk of terrorist attacks, improving the quality of the public realm and promoting pedestrian safety and the economic health of Lower Manhattan. The NYC Department of Transportation's Street Management study, the Chinatown Circulation Study, the Fulton Street Corridor and other studies affecting Lower Manhattan's streets and sidewalks should be coordinated, and their recommendations considered for funding by the LMDC and the City.
- b. Neighborhood planning studies such as Fulton Corridor, Chinatown, East River Waterfront and Greenwich Street South must be coordinated and opened to public input in the coming months. Cost estimates should be developed for their implementation so they may be considered for CDBG funding.

6. Set higher targets for environmentally sustainable design at the World Trade Center site, adopting a more holistic approach that ties together commercial buildings, public open spaces, memorial and cultural elements and transportation.

- a. Work with developers experienced in green building design to overcome resistance to higher upfront costs, or use public subsidies to offset upfront premiums.

This goal must be addressed by the LMDC, the Port Authority, and Silverstein Properties in consultation with architects, developers and consultants.