

Comments on the replacement designs for New York's World Trade Towers

Op-ed Piece for the New York Times

by

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The replacement designs for New York's World Trade Towers exhibit a sense of American architecture that has lost its way and is virtually devoid of cultural meaning or depth of human purpose. I write as an architect from the other side of the country—Portland, Oregon—and respectfully suggest that the direction of the rebuild has gone fundamentally wrong, and needs correction. Architecture can have great meaning and effect on a people; this, in fact, is why those twin towers were singled out for attack. What is our response?

From around the nation we have all watched, with great interest, the discussion of what to do with the building site. We know there was a competition as to the design. Some wanted to rebuild exact copies of the original towers. Others wanted smaller or larger towers. Some wanted, and some didn't want, a large landscaped square at the base. A blue-ribbon panel made the choice. The process has focused on how to get a new building erected as soon as possible. From a symbolic standpoint, the apparent goal has been to show that America will continue on with business as usual and that New York will not be changed by this event. We work on the design of replacement buildings, more or less the same as those that existed before, as if to challenge them to be hit again.

Instead of rebuilding with an architectural program and aesthetic that speaks of normal corporate, office tower architecture, why don't we design buildings that truly respond to the symbolic nature of the 9-11 attack? An example of a totally different solution would be to build an Islamic Research Center at the base of those towers, to try to understand why this happened. It is clear that we still do not really understand or comprehend the anger that is pointed at us by much of the Muslim world. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that even 13% of

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American Muslims believe that suicide bombings can be justified. That is in our own country. Obviously that percentage is much higher abroad.

Such an Islamic Research Center would accept these facts, and then work to understand them, finding ways to resolve and change the anger through peaceful means. Such an Islamic Research Center would signal to all the world's peoples that we are so strong that we can look critically at ourselves, and invite the enemy to our sacred shores, to find the necessary ways to live together in peace. Who among us still believes our bombs and weapons of the past six years are accomplishing this goal?

From an architectural standpoint—which includes defining the “program” of uses for the building, and then designing a building that can grow and nurture those uses—a research center like this would require a totally different design than just more modern office towers. The 9/11 Commission Report noted “failure of imagination” as one of the four significant failures of the government in being unable to foresee 9/11. The proposed solution? Re-shuffle existing agencies into one big agency and appoint a new director. Clearly, lack of imagination remains a serious problem. Let's not make the same mistake in re-designing these buildings. We need, literally, to start from the ground up.

There are undoubtedly other innovative ways to use the symbolism of the World Trade Center site for great American purpose. Rather than pretending that this act was nothing more than a mistake of evil peoples, we must respond by asking: “Why would one group of peoples so demonize another people?” This was a major act, by a population much larger than ours, representing peoples from many nations, from all parts of the globe.

Our current approach of rebuilding the World Trade Center towers to mimic what existed before is the act of a close-minded culture. We are a great nation; we must do better than that.

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