

What is it That We Do...?

Comments delivered to the New York architecture community, September 25, 2001 at the Architecture League's Convocation in the Great hall, Cooper Union, NY – Peter Wheelwright, Chair, Department of Architecture, Parsons School of Design

I am very happy to be here for many reasons and while I typically tend to shy away whenever too many architects collect - fond as I am of my profession and respectful of so many of you - it seems appropriate that I say something to you tonight.

As many of you know, both my home of 21 years and my office were destroyed 2 weeks ago. Both were in a quirky turn of the century loft building fronting on Liberty Street opposite WTC 4. Like so many other New Yorkers – the lucky ones – my wife and I got out in the nick of time and began to run. At that point our roof was on fire from the debris of the second plane strike. There is a lot that I don't remember clearly of that morning and more that I need not speak of, but besides having the presence of mind to save our 12 year old son's dog, I recall wondering which way to run. North and West would take us deeper into the towers' shadows; North and East lay City Hall; South was toward Battery Park, Federal landmarks, the Statue of Liberty; due East, the NY Stock exchange and Federal Hall. It was a confusing moment when we believed not that the towers would collapse but that we might be experiencing a sustained attack on specific targets. To run in any direction - it seemed to me - was to find oneself situated within a space suddenly highly charged; a luminescence rung by the material and memorial fabric of our history, our city, our nation, and our international identity.

Ultimately, we wove through many of these places on our way to safety, managing to stay ahead of the seemingly self-generating cloud of smoke and debris, which so thoroughly claimed the grid of urban space we left behind. We were lucky, our children safe at school were lucky but, sadly, it is certain that everyone of us here knew or know others who were not.

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A few days ago, I stood with a fireman and a police officer at my demolished windows staring into the hole where Tower 2 had been. Even in their resigned acceptance of the loss of men they had known well, there is something missing and perhaps unthinkable, when they say...*"hey, this is what we do...others go out, we go in..."* Whatever it is that is being said here, at the very least, seems to force a question on all of us here in this hall....*"hey, what is it that we do..."*

Well, I am an architect and I am an educator. I am certain of these things and I take them very seriously. But, I'm having a very hard time figuring out just what it is that we do now or should do in this unusual time. I could not answer the officer who when he learned that I was an architect, asked me "what do you think they're going to build here now?" For him, I seemed to be holding the disciplinary authority of the specialist, the expert, the master planner. I could tell he was disappointed when I told him his guess was

as good as mine. Not to be deterred, he ran through the litany of options we have all heard. Re-build the towers exactly as they were, re-build the towers taller, make a memorial park but, then again, no the real estate is too valuable. I told him of Mr. Silverstein's calculus: 2 becomes four, 1/2 size, memorial in the middle. He thought this was clever and let the image settle in as he went back to scanning the debris field.

But his question rubbed a wound. He had asked what "*they*" were going to build; I was left out of the question; less an authority than a kind of indulged dilettante in the production of urban space. I didn't tell him that there are two things I fear most for the future of this site.

The first is the juggernaut of the bottom line: real estate values, hyper-economic imperatives, cutthroat development, compromised civic opportunities, cynical sentimentality masquerading as honored memory. A bit of this is inevitable and, perhaps, in some inimitable New York way, might contribute some needed vitality to this dead ground. But to obscure a public voice in its need for presence, acknowledgement, and access to a field of memory would be to compound an unbearable sadness. On the other hand, this same thought brings me to my other fear: that we architects, by virtue of our very exclusion from the determining policies of urban space, might engage either in the kind of melodramatic squabbling and bombast that has both bemused and bewildered the public - or stumble over one another with the kind of pre-mature and righteous declarations that has consistently fueled an ungenerous competition within our community.

We need not have formal or even political consensus but we must demonstrate a shared and informed conviction that urban space matters. That we understand its economic requirements, its formal power to shape sociality, its capacity to acquire inadvertent symbolic solace and comfort, its reflection of the *never* so important values underlying our often naïve but remarkable constitutional democracy. It seems to me, we need to demonstrate this by our acts both as architects and as citizens.

It is certain that at many levels we *will* be involved. Some of us will be called forward to study this site, some will help develop policy, some of us will directly chart its future in both planning and design. As this takes place, it will be an opportunity for those called to step back a bit from parochial and personal interests, to reach across our community for the best we have to offer, to generate thoughtful and critical discussion, and above all to persuade others that we should have a determining voice not because *we think* it is our right but because we have earned the civic trust to that right.

When they were first built, the World Trade Towers were remarkable for the cleavage they cut through architecture culture - a duel, so to speak, between those architects who hated them and those who loved them. It was a healthy discussion at the time and raised a number of important stylistic, urban, and political issues that still lurk in urban discourse today. But in the past 30 years or so, these towers acquired something far more complex than any of us could have imagined then. I think of my three young children who were born and raised in the reflected light of those towers. I think about teaching each of them

what to do if they ever became lost in the city and it was always with a sense of pride and proprietary right that I would say..."just look up, kids, and head for the towers, that's where home is."

Unlike the official government landmarks I avoided two weeks ago, the towers had played to a larger imagination. This, sadly, has been made abundantly clear. There seems to be a kind of super-condensed speed to their history now...there and gone...leaving an unfulfilled absence around which we are all now searching for our bearings. I hope we will find them again. *That* is all I am sure of so far. Thank you