



Rosh Hashanah 2006

Fifth Anniversary Memorial to the World Trade Center Tragedy

Reflections by Kenneth Lewis

Thank you for this opportunity to speak, especially in such esteemed company. As Peter said I am an architect and associate partner at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and, in just about 10 days, I will mark my 20th anniversary with that firm. When I graduated from architectural school, it never occurred to me that I would work for one firm for so long nor would I ever have expected to have the opportunity to work on a project of such importance as the reconstruction of the World Trade Center. Please grant me some poetic license as I talk about my experience of 9/11 though somewhat out of sequence.

On October 16, 2001, just over a month after 9/11, I attended the first meeting to discuss the rebuilding of the World Trade Center. By May 2002, construction vehicles were on site driving piles and drilling caissons for a new building, whose design had yet to be finalized. This first tower is on the site of 7 WTC, which was the last building to fall on 9/11, at 5 pm. That building opened in May of this year with much fanfare. I was very fortunate to have acted as the project manager for this building and an experience I won't soon forget.

Shortly after that first meeting, we quickly assembled a team of professionals, and our client brought in outside counselors, including the team investigating the collapse of the two towers. We also assisted the owner in putting together his management team for the project. In the simplest terms, our obligation in the design of the new 7 WTC was to set the tone for what is to come on the main site. The impetus for the accelerated schedule was a need to rebuild the destroyed Con-Ed substations, which were located on ground level of the original 7 WTC and which provided power to much of Lower Manhattan. Our goal was to have the station up and running within two years and to create a forward-looking design that looks back for lessons learned. We also had to create a building that would be among the most robust in the country, if not the world. We had to integrate into the design the results of the NIST (National Institute of Standards and Testing) study of the collapse of the Twin Towers, the concerns of the community and the new codes that were in the process of being rewritten. We brought in many outside experts, studied codes from other cities and countries, and reviewed buildings around the world that respond to safety concerns. We met with the trades and their representatives to convince them to put aside some of their archaic ways of working to allow for a more efficient way of erecting the building. My role has been to oversee and drive the effort for the entire project and to stand in for the entire design team presenting the design and convince others to make the move down town.

In addition to managing a team of architects and engineers and consulting with experts from around the world, I have also listened to store owners, artists, aspiring architects, stay-at-home moms, stay-at-home dads, retirees and lawyers and dentists who were driven to come up with their own vision for the rebuilding. We have had countless proposals, drawings and models sent to the office - all unsolicited - by people who have ideas about how best to rebuild the city, including those who feel we should rebuild the Twin Towers. These are by turns touching, inspired and occasionally funny but all are an indication of how personal this project feels to so many people. I have also been saddened to see people try to exploit the situation for their own personal or financial gain and those who have used the media or their

own proverbial soap boxes to support their narcissistic and cynical aims. I have also heard from an unusually large number of Israeli engineers proposing systems of escape from high-rise buildings. I should note here that until very recently the tallest 'skyscraper' in Israel was 20 stories.

Just prior to that first meeting with Larry Silverstein, in October of 2001, I learned that my firm (SOM) had already been working with Silverstein Properties - prior to 9/11 -- on a new program of enhancements for the World Trade Center, that would primarily focus on the lobbies, retail areas and plazas around the Trade Center. We all knew that 7 WTC was the last building to fall on 9/11, no one lost his life and Con-Ed wanted to get their substation up and running as soon as possible. What we did not know was that Mr. Silverstein wanted to rebuild 7 World Trade Center exactly as it was - reusing the original drawings of the building but updating them to current office standards of the day. We all understood why: the building was an extremely successful development and had personal meaning for Mr. Silverstein because it was the first building he ever built himself. To our way of thinking that was a poor idea and would represent a huge missed opportunity. The original 7 was so ugly and so ordinary that we could not find any pre-9/11 photographs of the building.

Separating ourselves from the emotions of the moment and the desire to 'quickly get back up,' we asked our client to step back and ask basic questions: Should the building really be 2.1 million square feet? Should the floors really be huge, almost windowless, spans? Wasn't there a need or desire to make the tower a green building? Shouldn't we address concerns about employee satisfaction and work life? And how should this new building set the tone for what was to follow? Remember this was more than a year and half before the Urban Design proposals, before the International Competition on the main site and before the reports were completed on the collapse of the Twin Towers.

We - and this was a collective we of clients, private entities such as Verizon and Con-Ed, landowner, city, and state agencies - and the community worked together in a way I had not seen before or certainly since. I believe because there was no loss of life in the collapse of 7 WTC, this collective we did not feel saddled by the overwhelming emotions that have so influenced the work on the main site.

Our primary job in those initial meetings was to get back to basic principals of urban design and architecture, and to remember the overwhelming reluctance of tenants to return downtown. And so we pulled out maps dating from the mid 17th century to just before the trade center was conceived by Austin Tobin and the Rockefeller Brothers. We found, as we always have known, that this city is made up of, and is inextricable from, its streets and blocks, its waterfront and the connective systems of mass transportation. And we made a decision to propose the reintroduction of Greenwich Street through the World Trade Center site, in order to reestablish the connection between Tribeca and Lower Manhattan that had been broken when the Trade Center was built in the early seventies. To state the obvious, the reinstatement of Greenwich meant that the Trade Center could not be rebuilt as the monolith it was.

Nothing could have prepared us for what 9/11 was going to mean to us and how it would change our lives - personally and professionally - over these past 5 years. Since October 16, 2001, I have been the project manager on 7 World Trade Center, have acted as Silverstein's and SOM's design representative in discussions of the World Trade Center Master Plan Guidelines, as well as acting as project manager of World Trade Center Tower One, also known as the Freedom Tower. If I stay with SOM until the building's completion in 2011, I will have worked on the building 10 years.

Prologue

Now let me give you the prologue. SOM's offices are located at 14 Wall Street just a few blocks south and a few blocks east of the Twin Towers. We had a clear view of the Towers from the windows along the west side of our office. While I personally had little business at the Trade Center, many of my coworkers were in the center on any given day, having breakfast meetings at Windows on the World, shopping in the mall, visiting clients like AON or just passing through the PATH station on their way to the office from New Jersey or on the way to the World Financial Center or other subway stations. The Twin Towers were the backdrop to our busy lives downtown.

The week of September 11 was our son Sam's first full week of 2nd grade. Transitions for Sam, I think he would agree, can sometimes be tough and we thought it best to speak with his new teacher as soon as possible, which meant one week after school started. After trying for several days, we received an email on September 10 from the teacher, who I make a point of thanking every year, which asked us to meet with her early on 9/11. I would catch a late Metro North train from Irvington-on-Hudson to the city following our 8 am conference.

After a very convivial conference, Jen and I started walking together to the station, a very rare moment on a spectacular day. It was then I received a phone call from my fellow project manager Philip Palmgren. Philip called to say that a small plane had hit the trade center and that the design team we were currently working with had taken a break, out of curiosity I'm sure, to stand in a plaza diagonally across from the south tower to see what had happened. I believe it was Liberty Plaza. The team was working on the Time Warner Center, another significant project of the moment. At that time, there were more than 250 professionals working around the clock to complete the project. SOM had more than 25 architects working on an isolated floor in our offices on Wall Street. The team had been together about 3 years at that point and was very, very close. Philip said things were kind of crazy downtown and suggested I not come in to the office. He did this because we had been working many long hours. I said it was okay and would be in the office by 9:30 or so. As we were on the phone I heard a loud bang, Philip exclaimed Oh my god, and said very calmly way that I did NOT want to come in. I honestly can't remember my response.

We found out later that what almost our team had seen was the second plane hitting the south Tower in a huge fireball. The team ran as did everyone else in all directions some taking many hours to get home. Jen and I walked down to the Irvington waterfront where the trains run and watched on that spectacular clear day the plume of smoke blowing eastward. We went home and sat fixated on the TV staring in absolute disbelief as the towers collapsed. My focus over the next two weeks was to account for all the people in our office. I threw myself into this task and was able to get to our office by Friday as part of a core team evaluating our firm's next steps. There was an outpouring of offers from clients and colleagues to let us use their offices until ours were cleaned. Fortunately, all our office windows had been closed and none of the corrosive dust and debris came into our office. By Monday we were able to re-open (albeit without phone service, internet access or a functional HVAC system). We felt an obligation to keep working on our projects that at the time included a new terminal at JFK, a new New York Stock Exchange downtown and many other projects around the world. It took us until the following Saturday to account for the full staff. Tragically, our coworker Arkady Zaltsman, a 45-year old Jewish emigre from Moldavia was working on the 105th floor of the south tower that morning. He called a coworker shortly after the plane hit to say something was going on. He was not heard from again. Though I did not work directly with Arkady, I knew him as one of the early birds in the office who greeted everyone each day with a warm smile. He was one of our most beloved coworkers.

Epilogue

Despite the lack of press coverage, deliberate because it may have cast an 'evil' developer in a favorable light, and forgetting my personal involvement, 7 World Trade Center is probably the best high rise building in New York and probably the world. It is, in the words of Vitruvius, the Roman architect and thinker who lived during the 1st Century BC. "Beautiful, Economic and Truthful (or Virtuous)." It has incorporated the best engineering, sustainability concepts, design, and art that the world offers. It is the result of a true collaborative process of artists, architects, engineers, builders and clients. It is not a Chrysler or Dubai tower (a worlds tallest building under construction in the Middle East), but a subtle luminous entry piece to the new World Trade Center. David M. Childs, the Senior Design Partner in our firm, should be credited with making this happen. It was he who convinced Larry to step back from his original idea. It was David's absolute conviction and optimism that we could make downtown great again that inspired our whole team.

I would also like to acknowledge the engineers from my firm who participated in the recovery operation. I am not sure whether this was due to the death of a coworker or the drive many of us all felt to be involved, but they put their lives at risk to help find survivors and prevent further death and injury during the recovery. I note here that no one was killed during the recovery and clean up.

I am very proud of this building, as you probably tell, so I encourage all of you to visit 7 WTC and am always happy to take people on tours of the building.

Lastly I would like to suggest reading Deborah Sontag's (recent) New York Times article in September 11th's special section, "Broken Ground" describing the past 5 years. It's probably the most objective and accurate piece of reporting on the history, machinations and results of the World Trade Center rebuilding to date.

Thank you, again, for asking me to speak on this occasion. I am truly honored.