

# New life rises from ashes of World Trade Center site

## Dark past meets hope of bright future

By Douglas Quan, Postmedia News August 27, 2011



Work continues at the World Trade Centre site in late July 2011.

Photograph by: Mario Tama, Getty

Life, finally, has returned to "The Hole."

After lying dormant for years, the 6.5-hectare World Trade Center site is teeming with cranes, earth movers and 3,000 construction workers daily.

Their job? To transform the site into a place that simultaneously memorializes and revitalizes - where people can come to quietly reflect and where capitalism can flourish.

Architect Nick Zigomanis, whose Toronto-based firm Adamson Associates has played a role in shepherding major parts of the complex project, says he's confident the right balance has been struck.

"We had to decide what is the new way we're going to live after all this? Are we going to solidify all this into a gravesite and memorial and stop moving? Or are we going to live?" he said.

"For me there is absolutely nothing wrong in saying this is a place to live and shop and make money and bring the business here. That's why we're all here. New York wouldn't be New York."

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Zigomanis worried whether anyone ever wanted to build a skyscraper again.

Today, all he has to do is look out his office's windows at the World Trade Center site to get his answer.

Or rather, look up. On the northwest corner of the site sits the partially constructed One World Trade Center tower which, when completed, will be the tallest building in the United States - a symbol of American resilience, some might say defiance.

In addition to the 1,776-foottall signature tower, the plans also call for three more office towers, retail stores and a major transportation hub.

Equally important, the site will provide space for people to get away from the hustle and bustle.

The centrepiece of the site is a memorial plaza filled with a forest of oak trees. The original footprints of the Twin Towers have been transformed into pools; water gently cascades down their walls, the names of each 9/11 victim inscribed in bronze around their borders.

Arriving at this balance between rebirth and remembrance did not come easily.

During early phases in the solicitation of ideas, some designers were adamant there should be no commercial development anywhere on the site.

Others took the opposite view. Don't just rebuild, but rebuild bigger and stronger, they said.

Contributing to the problem were the numerous parties who had a say in the redevelopment.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey owns the site, developer Silverstein Properties is the major leaseholder, and the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. is a joint state-city corporation co-ordinating the effort.

Even after architect Daniel Libeskind's master site plan was chosen in 2003 following a worldwide competition, the reconstruction project faced further delays because of disagreements over the specific designs of each element of the site, which were parcelled out to several different architects.

A New York Times article in 2005 referred to the project as "one of the most muddled developments in the city's recent memory."

"It was very depressing to go by the site and read on a daily basis the incompetence of the powers involved. Everybody was fighting everybody else. Nothing was getting done," recalled Andrew Dolkart, director of the historic preservation program at Columbia University.

But now that the construction is well underway, it has helped to give a psychological boost to those who live and work in the area, he said. A site that was a "barren wasteland" for years is now slowly being "knitted back into the city."

New York City architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and architect David Childs took the lead role in designing One World Trade Center.

From its cubic base, the 105-storey tower rises in the form of eight isosceles-triangle glass walls, and tapers at the top.

"A skyscraper of that height has to be an icon. One of the things that was important to us in the beginning was to create an icon, a building that's recognizable only by its shape," said Montreal native Donald Marmen, an associate director at the firm.

As for the detailing, the firm chose a type of glass that is very specular and that would reflect light.

As the sun moves through the sky, the tower's surfaces shimmer like a kaleidoscope.

The other three towers, located along the site's eastern edge in descending height, each boast their own identities as well.

- Tower 2, designed by London-based firm Foster & Partners, comprises four minitowers whose diamond-shaped tops are cut off at an angle, as if to point back at the memorial plaza below.

- Tower 3, designed by London-based Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners, emphasizes transparency - showing the mechanical "guts" of the building.

- Tower 4, designed by Maki and Associates in Japan, takes on a minimalist approach with a cooler feel.

Sept. 11 really caused architects to think the "unthinkable" when incorporating safety features into their designs, Zigomanis said.

To that end, each tower was designed with additional options for getting out of the building, features to avoid a progressive collapse, better fireproofing and more emergency backup lighting.

A billboard next to the site says the future has "never been brighter."

But traces of 9/11's dark days are never far. Street vendors peddle \$5 booklets with graphic images of the planes barreling into the Twin Towers.

A big question, however, remains: will people want to work here again? Dolkart, the Columbia University expert, admits he would not want an office in One World Trade Center.

"If there's any building in the world that's a target, that's it," he said.

But there are some promising signs. In May, a news release announced publishing company Conde Nast would occupy one-third of the One World Trade Center tower, using the building as its headquarters and home for its magazines and websites.

Zigomanis says he gets his confidence from an encounter he had with a stranger a few years ago.

He and other project planners were heading to a meeting with technical drawings tucked underneath their arms.

They passed a group of tourists trying to sneak a peek through the perimeter fencing. A woman in the group, recognizing they were probably involved in the redevelopment, stopped them.

"Whatever you do, make sure this doesn't become a graveyard," she said.

"This is a place to live."