

One World Trade Center rises at terror's void at Ground Zero

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Photo credit: AP | 1 World Trade Center, left, the National September 11 Memorial, bottom left, and 4 World Trade Center, right, are bathed in light on the eleventh anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. (Sept. 11, 2012)

Finally, 11 years after the Sept. 11 attacks, the hole that terrorists blasted into the New York skyline has been filled in.

On Tuesday's anniversary, the new One World Trade Center now reaches 1,368 feet into the sky. Though still unfinished, it dominates lower Manhattan, a shimmering guidepost, visible from miles away in every direction just as the iconic Twin Towers once were.

"The thrill is back," said Pat Harris, of Sayville, a charter boat captain who has been taking passengers to the North Cove Marina near the trade center for 22 years. Before 9/11, "seeing the [Twin Towers] after a sail in New York Harbor meant so much for everyone on board," Harris said. With the rising tower more than a quarter-mile high, "I'm feeling that New York drama again. At night it's unbelievable when it's all lit up."

'A beautiful tower'

Anne Ielpi, whose firefighter son Jonathan, 29, was among the nearly 3,000 killed, said that each day she crosses the Saddle Rock Bridge in Great Neck, she sees "a beautiful tower" rising 15 miles to the southwest and takes a measure of satisfaction.

The loss of her son was "a wound that doesn't heal," she said. But the emerging skyscraper, popularly known as the Freedom Tower, "tells those animals [the terrorists] they haven't won, and that we have to go on every day."

The tower, which will top out at 1,776 feet, is due to be completed by early 2014, the anchor of \$15 billion in redevelopment at Ground Zero.

"I feel very proud of it," said former Gov. George Pataki, a central player in the early years of redevelopment planning, as he gazed downtown out the window of his law office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. "We are going to have the iconic statement at Ground Zero I had hoped for."

Getting there is taking twice as long as it was supposed to. In 2003, Pataki unveiled a timeline that called for completing the main tower by 2007-2008. But the mega-project became mired in agonizing delays. Stakeholders sparred over finances. There were major revisions and redesigns of the plan to meet concerns for security against new terror attacks and to adjust to lowered forecasts for office-space demand.

As One World Trade Center and a sister office structure, the 977-foot Tower Four rise up, changes are being made closer to the ground as well.

A 9/11 memorial, with its waterfalls and parapets inscribed with the names of the dead, opened a year ago and has attracted 4.5 million visitors. The National September 11 Memorial & Museum was stalled in a \$156 million dispute between the Port Authority and museum's nonprofit foundation until Monday when a deal was reached.

Many say the doubts from the early years that downtown could ever recover are gone.

"It's hard to remember that a just a decade ago, many people were convinced that lower Manhattan was finished as a business district," said developer Larry Silverstein, who had just taken over as leaseholder of the Twin Towers from the Port Authority when they were attacked.

New center of downtown

Clad in a dark, reflective glass skin that contrasts with the shiny metal exterior of the previous buildings, the new structures are revealing their own personality as they emerge as the new center of downtown.

The reconstruction of the site is creating an environment that reconnects Ground Zero to the city in a way the old trade center didn't. Streets that were once blocked by the old towers will now be open to pedestrians.

"It is not finished, but we have created a place that is much more like the rest of New York than the old World Trade Center -- much more pedestrian friendly," said Janno Lieber, the trade center project director for Silverstein Properties, which owns the office leases for much of the site.

"It is important that the entire area becomes rewoven into the fabric of New York. You are finally seeing it now," said David Emil, president of the Lower Manhattan Development Corp., the public agency formed to rebuild the area.

One World Trade Center, at the northwest corner of Ground Zero, is 55 percent leased, with major tenants including publisher Condé Nast and the U.S. General Services Administration. When it and Tower Four are complete, more than 600 police officers will be assigned to a special World Trade Center command. The 11-story concrete base of One World Trade Center is windowless and hardened to protect against truck bombs.

That security design was one cause of delay in the tower's construction. The larger problem was that so many agencies and powerful individuals were involved. Pataki created the LMDC to oversee the rebuilding in November 2001. But flexing their muscles were the Port Authority, which owned the site, as well as prime office leaseholder Silverstein.

Ultimately, Silverstein agreed to exchange his right to the footprint area of the two downed towers for the right to build office towers surrounding the Memorial.

A vision for the site

The overall vision for the project is that of designer and architect Daniel Libeskind, who in 2003 unveiled a concept containing five skyscrapers with angled rooftops all sloped downward in the direction of the memorial.

He also planned four other buildings, a performance hall and a transportation terminal, as well as the restoration of Fulton and Greenwich streets through the site.

Silverstein then chose David M. Childs, who had designed the new Seven World Trade Center to replace the old structure that collapsed in the attack, as the primary architect for the Freedom Tower. Other architects were selected for the four other buildings, the transportation terminal, memorial and museum.

Economic reality soon set in. While One World Trade Center and Tower Four are rising high, Tower Two and Tower Three are not much more than stubs above ground as Silverstein and the Port Authority wait for the economy and demand for office space to change. Tower Five's site, owned by the LMDC, is serving as a temporary entry point to the memorial.

For all the changes, "It is something I am so proud of," Libeskind said of Ground Zero. "In the beginning, there was a hole, a kind of sadness. I see the change on people's faces. It is no longer a void. It has to be an inspiration, like the great piazzas of Italy. It will have millions of visitors."

Michael Keane, 49, manager of O'Hara's, a bar and restaurant on Cedar Street a block from Ground Zero, said the rebuilding signals hope.

"The tall buildings make you feel good," said Keane, who had to flee from the collapsing Twin Towers 11 years ago. "We had suffered for a long time."

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