



An Open Letter to the Media

Ground Zero and the Public Trust

The public can always count on politicians to put their own interests first – that is why we need the media on our side. We are hoping that what is presented here will prompt some journalists to ask themselves if the press might inadvertently be contributing to the breakdown at Ground Zero – and what that could mean for our future.

A *Crains NY* editorial noted on May 3, 2009 that “another impasse at the World Trade Center threatens the meager progress that has been made...” It pointed out that “the developer has no money at stake, because Mr. Silverstein used his insurance proceeds to reclaim the equity he originally put into the site.” It goes on to discuss who should assume the risk of building up the site – avoiding the central question of what is the risk for the American people of failing to make a full recovery at last.

The Twin Towers were glittering examples of American exuberance. They were icons of peace and stability through trade. They were symbols of the American ideals of tolerance and cooperation between people. Now, in the eyes of the world, and worse, in our own, we seem to have lost both our faith in ourselves and our willingness to defend those ideals.

All would agree that our demoralized country deserves the best possible World Trade Center. But as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey pledges yet another billion public dollars to mere crisis management, where are the reports analyzing *Twin Towers II* – the plan that promises a stunning alternative?

If there is a plan that could restore the world-famous skyline of New York by the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, above a memorial that victims’ family members strongly prefer, why would anyone want to do anything else? Why would officials try to force us to settle for another plan that is widely seen as second-rate? And why would the media allow it?

If there is a plan to build 21st-century, mixed-use Twin Towers for billions of dollars less than the official plan and years ahead of schedule, why isn’t that above-the-fold news? *For going on eight years the American people have told their leaders to “Rebuild the Twin Towers.” And for going on eight years officials have ignored them.*

Now that doing it the officials' way has proven to be such a bust, it would be criminal to continue to allow them to behave as if the people have no choice or say in the matter. But the public's wishes can only be heard if the media will report them.

In 2004, under the heading "Back to Basics: Twin Towers II," *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp advocated "abandoning the flawed ground zero design process altogether in favor of reconstructing the twin towers more or less as they were." Now, after another five years of misguided, wasteful effort, we are at a point where it becomes downright perverse to ignore his advice.

Getting to the truth would not be hard to do. What harm could there be in examining a plan for re-engineered Twin Towers that disarms every critic who looks into it? And what about the harm of refusing to look?

Officials have avoided commenting on *Twin Towers II* because they do not want to draw attention to the plan. Don't journalists wonder why? All who prefer to make up their own minds can see the ten-foot presentation model and a full set of plans by appointment. Only those who for some reason don't want to be convinced would turn down a chance to weigh the evidence for themselves.

If a trial judge were to bar material facts from the courtroom, any resulting verdict would be overturned on appeal. In this case, it is our country's future that is on trial and an appeal would come too late. So we are pleading with members of the jury to speak up and ask the questions that need to be asked and answered, for all of our sakes.

If journalists will simply examine the *Twin Towers II* model and blueprints for themselves, they would discover that an enormously popular, cost-effective, and time-efficient alternative can still convert the chaos and disappointment at Ground Zero into a stunning triumph.

The fortunes of the whole country would be lifted by returning two of America's most famous icons to its most famous skyline within just a few years. And the transition to *Twin Towers II* would be surprisingly smooth. The economy of constructing one tower twice, instead of four dissimilar buildings with scores of different floorplates is apparent.

Twin Towers II, with its elegantly reimagined interiors and exteriors, would quickly make the Trade Center a world-class destination. The advantage of building two mixed-use towers – instead of four office towers that would become a drag on the real estate market – is clear.

Repositioned within the protected “superblock,” the new Twin Towers would feature soaring sun-drenched lobbies, rather than the paranoid atmosphere of the windowless “Freedom Tower.” The first sixty floors above the six-story lobbies would form the commercial bases, with 40” wide floor-to-ceiling windows. Then, in each tower, from the 67th floor skypark to the skylit roof, some of the most desirable residences, corporate suites, and public spaces in the world would encircle a thirty-story atrium.

At the top of Tower One would be the new Windows on the World restaurant and banquet rooms. A staircase in the ornamental mast would take those who make the climb over 1700 feet into the sky. At the top of Tower Two would be the new Top of the World Observation Deck and above that what could arguably become the most amazing rooftop cafe in New York or any other city.

Building the project at grade level would integrate it into the neighborhood and create a beautifully landscaped pedestrian oasis, with the three twelve-story lower buildings in the complex serving as a protective buffer and housing retail storefronts and restaurants. One of the lower buildings would rise above the transit hub, converting that structure into prime leasable space and giving the New York City Opera a stunning home of its own.

The plan originally included acres of trading floors built into the lower buildings, but given the drastic change in the financial markets and the need to let their future evolve, an ideal use for that space would be to consolidate and expand the city’s appeal as a Hollywood-on-the-Hudson – where studios would thrive in the most sensational location imaginable and studio executives would be just an elevator ride away from their front doors.

Another proposed use for the lower buildings is as a Downtown Convention Center – a purpose that would, again, enhance the business climate, instead of siphoning off the vitality of the city’s real estate market.

The most advanced green technology and a state-of-the-art evacuation system would be incorporated into both towers. The towers would be reinforced to withstand an airborne assault, the number of stairwells have been doubled, and fireproofing would go well beyond current standards.

The transition plan would leverage the tremendous popular appeal of the new project to convert current contracts and procurements under the most favorable terms. Unions would be motivated to cooperate, as construction workers would finally be building what they have wanted to build all along.

All of this renewal would be a tribute to the unquenchable American spirit and in one sense would be the best memorial of all. Meanwhile, as important as a fitting memorial is to all of us, what has to be grasped is that the current *Reflecting Absence* memorial is actually blighting the whole site. It is no accident that there is only one private tenant after so many years. And it is no wonder. Why would any company choose to become part of a complex where the main focus is on two depressing voids in a bland suburban setting?

Being in denial won't change that dynamic. Lots of mistakes were made in the aftermath of 9/11. We suffered a national concussion. The aim should not be to find fault but to find solutions. It's time to admit that the current memorial is a dispiriting drain that heightens feelings of alienation and of being swept away by events, instead of taking control and overcoming them. That is what New York and the country did so bravely after 9/11. That is what we want to remember. That is what we do best.

The support that the Memorial Foundation has garnered is primarily for the *concept* of a memorial, not for the current design. Even if there weren't reason to question the process that selected it, there are a billion dollars' worth of reasons to reassess its value. The *Twin Towers II* plan, on the other hand, features a memorial that would cost a fraction of what *Reflecting Absence* is budgeted for and virtually nothing to operate. It is far greener and uses very little energy. But above all, it stirs the heart.

One reason why the *Twin Towers II* memorial is so much more fitting is that 9/11 family members helped to design it and strongly support it. Part of the disconnect between the official vision and the public's vision is that the current plan seems to want to bury 9/11, as if planners are afraid it will interfere with reclaiming the site, while the public rightly sees in the revitalization of the entire site a tribute to the fallen.

Whereas the *Twin Towers II* memorial incorporates the wall that survived the collapse and surrounds the original footprints with the flags of the nations that lost citizens, the official plan seeks to camouflage the memorial, making it invisible from street level, and succeeding only in giving the memorial acres a gloom that permeates the whole project.

Dr. Rosaleen Tallon, who lost her firefighter brother, Sean, on 9/11 has said, "It is beyond my comprehension why the original Twin Towers' facade is not going to play a prominent role in America's National 9/11 Memorial." Indeed, nothing could be a more vivid reminder of the tragic day, and those that followed, than that defiant wall standing against all odds. Seeking to hide it away inside a museum betrays an agenda that doesn't really want to encourage people to remember, but rather, to forget. Those in charge seek to distance us from the sadness, not understanding that what they are doing is distancing us from the pride.

In contrast, *Twin Towers II*, which recently joined forces with the highly regarded *World Memorial*, has integrated the *World Memorial* vision of installing the world's largest carillon into the surviving facade. One hundred and five bells, one for each country that lost a son or daughter, would chime the hours – and orchestral bell concerts would become signature events on the Memorial Mall throughout the year.

At the First Responders Memorial, above an Eternal Flame, would be a sculpture of the iconic image of the three firefighters raising the flag on 9/11, with the names engraved in the base of all who answered the call of duty and paid the ultimate price. And between the two original footprints would be a footbridge with Sir Isaac Newton's words inscribed on the treads: "Men build too many walls and not enough bridges." The overall atmosphere would not be one of reflecting on the absence but, rather, of sensing the presence of those we lost and rededicating ourselves to building a much better world in their honor.

The World Trade Center is an invaluable public property. Aside from the emotional cost, upwards of twenty billion tax dollars were sent from Washington to revive Lower Manhattan and more public funding is pledged. The public has been a silent partner for far too long.

A recent MSNBC poll found an impressive 90% of the public supports scrapping the current plan in favor of new Twin Towers. This is what Americans have wanted all along. Who else can the public look to for help when the politicians fiddle? Who else but the press has the power to make them pay attention?

In a recent interview, Port Authority Executive Director Christopher Ward casually revealed that the Port Authority had made a \$1 billion offer to Mr. Silverstein, but "citing a confidentiality agreement" declined to discuss the details. Given that the Port Authority is a public agency, disbursing public funds, why would Mr. Silverstein be offered \$1 billion, *subject to a confidentiality agreement*? Who is being protected here? And shouldn't the media, as the public's watchdog, sound the alarm?

In the same interview, Mr. Ward went on to say, "I just don't see a Plan B. The implications of that — I don't want to consider them." What he doesn't want to consider are the implications *for him*. He was presented with an indisputable win-win solution when we met with him in September, 2008, and showed him a plan that a number of building industry professionals believe is far superior to the official project. He said he would look into it and get back to us. He never did. He repeatedly said he would inspect the model. He never did.

But officials can't just refuse to do their duty – unless the press signs off on it. Our democracy depends upon the exercise of the people's good sense and upon officials' respect for our judgment. But it will not work without a dedicated press. Our economy is a wreck today because we spent a decade deferring to so-called experts who, we were assured, had everything under control. Of course, we now know they didn't. "Experts" have also been in control of what is being built at Ground Zero, with equally unsound results.

The Port Authority's recently released *Construction Progress Report* is a case in point. The report on the procurement and fabrication of materials seems to be saying that – right or wrong – it's too late to do anything about it. That might have been convincing in the past, but Americans have gotten terribly used to paying for officials' bad judgment. The World Trade Center is the last place we should be allowing them to defraud us. Fortunately, the *Twin Towers II* plan is so much more economical to construct than the official plan that billions of dollars in savings could offset the waste from bad decision-making.

But the far more compelling argument is that building the *Twin Towers II* project would produce a significantly more valuable property. Mr. Ward insists on treating Ground Zero as a mundane real estate development. But from a practical standpoint alone, new Twin Towers would result in a far more successful and impressive World Trade Center than what is now contemplated. Someone needs to investigate who gains from pretending otherwise. The American people certainly don't.

The public is entitled to know why Mr. Ward put the current project on steroids last fall instead of thoroughly reviewing the *Twin Towers II* plan we presented to him. Running full-steam ahead toward an iceberg can hardly be called progress. Having tremendous public resources to pour into doing the wrong thing won't make it right.

After seven years of pushing dirt around at the site, why weren't contracts and procurements put on hold while the *Twin Towers II* claims were studied? Why is that plan being treated as if it were nothing more than a sketch on the back of a napkin, rather than the fruit of almost six years of devoted effort? Respected authorities believe it is a much better project. Mr. Ward and the Port Authority Commissioners were responsible to the public for getting to the truth before engaging in a frenzy of commitments. It was a stunning dereliction of their duty.

It will be instructive to see whether Mr. Ward reports on the *Twin Towers II* plan in the PA's forthcoming *2008 Annual Report*. Surely, a fully developed alternative to a project that makes less sense all the time is worth a mention. Considering how much of the groundwork had to be done for either plan, it would be misleading to suggest that what has been done to date prohibits going ahead with the much more cost-effective solution that is so strongly favored by the American people.

It is surprising how much of the work that has been started could still be adapted to the plan people actually want. There is no denying how much more efficient *Twin Towers II* would be to build. But, even if the considerable savings that the plan offers were offset by the ill-advised activity of recent months, it would still be a massive net gain for New York City and the country. In fact, looking back on what has been a frustrating process, we may discover that every delay ultimately worked in the public's favor. Because now we still have the opportunity to do something worthy.

The official plan was a bust even during the boom years. Its current problems can't be blamed on the economic downturn. Mr. Silverstein couldn't get the banks to finance his buildings when the economy was roaring because there was no market interest in the overall property. If the project is as fatally flawed as it seems, *developing it in stages will never repair the underlying defects*. It is time to rise above the politics and recognize the fundamental folly of:

- Releasing Mr. Silverstein from the contractual obligation he was under to rebuild the Twin Towers;
- Imposing an esoteric "imperative" to run pre-WTC streets through a site that was protected by a virtual moat;
- Not pulling the plug on a morbid, billion-dollar memorial that would cost at least \$50 million dollars *a year* to operate;
- Allowing the Port Authority to manage the project without strict oversight.

The future of Ground Zero is in the media's hands. The public has been fed a highly selective account of the most significant building project of our lifetime. It is being heavily financed with our tax dollars, even as it discredits us in the eyes of the world. What defense could there be for preferring an awkward and wasteful plan over spectacular mixed-use Twin Towers?

Who would even try to justify such misguided thinking? And on what grounds? That we should be proud of a project that has only attracted one private tenant after all these years? Proud of a memorial that 9/11 family members detest and that leaves the public cold? Proud to have a couple of six-story retail stumps put in place of towers that may or may not be built in another ten or fifteen years? That the official plan is worth the extra billions and extra time? That officials couldn't please everyone, so they chose to please no one instead?

Perhaps the best and most fitting solution would be for the Federal Government to take over the air rights by eminent domain, leaving the Port Authority to build and run the transportation hub below. That way, the American public's enormous emotional and financial stake will be protected, while New York and New Jersey could be compensated for the fair market value of the property at a time when they really need the money.

If New York and New Jersey were willing to lease the Twin Towers to Silverstein Properties in return for operating capital in 2001, why wouldn't New York and New Jersey be happy to make the same sort of arrangement with the American people in 2009? A private consortium could be formed to build and market the Towers with the people as stakeholders.

One way or another, more public funds will be needed to underwrite the future of the site, so at least we would finally have something to show for our money. Most of us will agree that we deserve better, that there is no time to waste, and that whatever is truly best can most likely be arrived at by asking what the American people want.

To paraphrase President Obama: “This is America. We figured out how to put a man on the moon in ten years. You can't tell us that we can't figure out how to overcome every obstacle to building a new World Trade Center we can be proud of.” Every obstacle at Ground Zero can be overcome – when the American people are finally allowed to become part of the solution.

