

Symbolism and the city: From towers of power to 'Ground Zero'

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Abstract

This paper explores the symbolism of New York City's World Trade Center (WTC) before and after the devastating attack of September 11, 2001. The many metaphors captured in the built space of the WTC site are interrogated from 'Ground Zero' to the symbolic significance of the new 'Freedom Tower' now nearing completion (2014). In fulfilling the intended symbolism of American economic power, the WTC towers became pop-culture symbols of New York City, and the United States. The WTC towers stood as twin icons of western economic dominance along with 'Wall Street' and 'Dow Jones' reflecting the American ethos of freedom and opportunity. However, the WTC also imbued negative, albeit unintended, symbolism such as the coldness of modernist architecture, social class disparities across urban America, and global domination. Plans for redeveloping the WTC site predominantly highlight the intended positive symbolic connotations of the former Twin Towers, including freedom and opportunity. This article points to the symbolic significance of urban built form and the potential negative consequences that are associated with iconic structures, including the new Freedom Tower.

Keywords: *symbolism, iconic architecture, New York City, World Trade Center*

Introduction

On September 11, 2001 a terrorist attack of horrific proportions destroyed the New York World Trade Center and surrounding structures. In addition to the political, economic, and environmental repercussions of the September 11, 2001 attack on and collapse of the World Trade Center complex in New York City (WTC), this major historical event also had important symbolic effects. Symbolism, both metaphorical and architectural, attached to iconic built structures in the urban environment can have very tangible consequences, as the history of the WTC proves. In this article various interpretations of symbolism attached to both the pre- and post- September 11 WTC are explored. The symbolic significance of the new 'Freedom Tower' now under construction on the former WTC site known as 'Ground Zero' is assessed. The analysis of the architectural representation of iconic structures such as the WTC and the new 'Freedom Tower' may help explain (and predict) human emo-

tions leading to positive and negative actions of individuals and groups. Indeed, there is a long fascination among geographers and planners to the symbolic functions of 'architectural gigantism' as an expression of global economic domination, political power, and nation building (Hajer 2005; King 1996).

Towers of Power

The World Trade Center complex in New York City (WTC) is one of many world-wide financial centres bearing the same name under an umbrella organization, the World Trade Centre Association. For the purposes of this paper, the acronym WTC will refer to the collection of former buildings occupying a site in lower Manhattan, New York, known as the World Trade Center. Specific reference to former or existing buildings on that site, such as the Twin Towers, Tower One, Tower Two, or the new Freedom Tower will be made as required.

The architects and builders responsible for the design and construction of the WTC intended to imbue it with symbolism that would portray boldness and confidence. The project was first proposed in 1946 during a post-World War II period of economic prosperity and optimism enjoyed by many of the former “Allied” countries. However, Lower Manhattan was long considered an undesirable, overcrowded location by many investors and therefore it did not benefit initially from any post-war prosperity (Gillespie 2001). In 1960 the WTC complex was conceived by New York’s influential Rockefeller family to stimulate activity and reverse Lower Manhattan’s economic stagnation (Bird 2003; Gillespie 2001; Greenberg 2003; Salomon 2002). To accomplish this feat, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (Port Authority), an agency responsible for the planning of the WTC in cooperation with architect Minoru Yamasaki and engineer Leslie Robertson, used architectural symbolism to attract tenants and gain attention (Ruchelman, quoted in Greenberg 2003; Wigley 2002). To establish the importance of the WTC, the Port Authority sought a design that would “solidify the United States’ global position in international trade” (Salomon 2002:88). The desire for the project to symbolize American economic power was present in the Port Authority’s intention to make the WTC the tallest building in the world (Gillespie 2001; Greenberg 2003). Furthermore, the project’s placement “at the end of the [Manhattan] island facing Europe to capture world attention” provided a symbolic articulation of its intended position as a centre for America’s international dealings (Wigley 2002:73). Over time, these plans for the built structure would strongly influence different kinds of symbolic significance, both positive and negative.

The Soul of New York: Positive Symbolic Significance

In some ways, the Port Authority’s symbolic intentions were fulfilled with positive results. For example, Bird (2003:89) notes that the project’s final design included “10 million square feet of office, retail and commercial space,” earning it the honour of being the world’s biggest office complex and reinforcing its symbolism of America’s global economic dominance. Similarly, the Port Authority’s goal of crafting the “world’s tallest building”, Tower One (North Tower), to take advantage of that title’s connotations of power was actualized (albeit for a short time) from 1972-1973. The title of “world’s tallest building” transferred to Chicago’s Sears Tower in 1973, before the WTC complex was officially completed (Gillespie 2001). Still, the Towers’ imposing height, visible in Figure 1, continued to carry connotations of power (Gillespie 2001). In addition, the Twin Towers’ image provided the backdrop against which CNN reporters presented updates on the global financial market (Gillespie 2001). This supports assertions that the WTC, specifically the iconic Twin Towers, successfully symbolized, and were emblematic of, the financial power of the United States and New York City within the global economy (Greenberg 2003; Zukin 2002). Furthermore, Greenberg (2003) notes that the Twin Towers were prominently featured as symbols of economic regeneration in a mar-



Figure 1: World Trade Center, New York.
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Trade_Center)

keting campaign that boosted tourism, economic activity, and positive perceptions of New York during that city’s fiscal and social troubles of the 1970s, which included bankruptcy, rising unemployment, and high crime rates. The above examples indicate that the WTC in many ways achieved the positive economic symbolism it was intended to portray.

In fact, the relatively positive symbolic connotations accumulated by the WTC, both in America and worldwide, possibly exceeded its intended symbolism of economic might. For instance, the WTC was used in popular culture to symbolize not only the economic power of New York and America, but also of the city itself. Demonstrating this, Bird (2003:87) asserts that the Twin Towers’ appearance in the opening credits of the television show *Sex and the City* conveyed a quintessential “New Yorkness”. Similarly, Greenberg (2003:386) writes that the Towers represented “the soul of New York.” The extent of the Twin Towers’ international visibility as symbols of New York and America is indicated by Gillespie’s (2001) comparison of their symbolic strength to that of Big Ben for England, or the Eiffel Tower for France. Gillespie (2001) also observes that no other building in New York was featured on as many postcards. In fact, according to Wigley (2002), no building in the world shared the Twin Towers’ postcard popularity.

Nobel (2005) suggests that the Twin Towers acquired the symbolic association of local economic and social regeneration, global prosperity, international sense of place and freedom. In line with this thought, Gillespie (2001:138) notes stories of illegal immigrants to America “clinging to a postcard of the WTC as a symbol for their hopes for a better world”. As the above examples indicate, the WTC symbolized New York, America, and

opportunity. To others, the Twin Towers symbolized something more sinister.

Inhumanity and Arrogance: Negative Symbolic Significance

Despite the positive connotations noted above not all of the WTC's symbolic effects were desirable. For instance, despite the Twin Towers' status as a symbol of New York in popular culture, elite architectural critics were almost unanimous in their dislike of the buildings (Gillespie 2001; Nobel 2005). The project's main architect, Minoru Yamasaki, had tried to avoid designing a traditional modernist skyscraper (Gillespie 2001; Salomon 2002), nevertheless Wigley (2002:74) observed the WTC's negative critical reception was due to its symbolism of the "inhumanity of modern architecture." Indeed, many sources (Goldberger, quoted in Gillespie 2001; Greenberg 2003; Nobel 2005) assert that the buildings were blank or bland—qualities that only enhanced their portrayal of inhumanity. Claims that the Twin Towers were unremarkable appear to contrast with the views of critics such as von Eckardt (in Gillespie 2001) and commentators such as Zukin (2002), who suggest that the WTC symbolized power too effectively, conveying an unattractive aura of arrogance. Whether the WTC symbolized architectural inhumanity, ordinary blandness, or overt conceit, critics overwhelmingly viewed the WTC as portraying negative traits.

The WTC also carried undesirable symbolic significance outside of architectural criticism, particularly regarding its social context. Greenberg (2003) asserts that the Twin Towers' grandeur and massive scale, characteristics that established their symbolism of economic power, clashed with their social surroundings during New York's fiscal and social crises in the 1970s. These harder economic times involved high rates of what is arguably, at an individual level, the antithesis of the Twin Towers' symbolic economic strength: unemployment. According to Greenberg (2003), prior to the Towers' inclusion in the economic marketing campaign described above, some believed the Towers' contrast with their social surroundings was actually used by the media to exemplify the city's problems, thus exacerbating the crisis by discouraging investment and tourism. Greenberg (2003:408) further asserts that even after the city's fiscal crisis ended, the Twin Towers' "clean, glossy image contrasted starkly" with New York's rising inequality from the 1970s to the 1990s. A key cause of this increasing disparity was the neoliberal deregulated service economy whose power the Twin Towers was seen to emulate. Greenberg's analysis suggests that the Twin Towers' symbolic connotations of financial dominance were viewed negatively in light of the city's social condition.

This dissonance, with economic prosperity on one hand and social inequality caused by an emergent political economy on the other, also appeared on an international scale. While most sources seem to agree that the WTC embodied America's dominance in the world economy, not everyone viewed this dominance positively. Greenberg (2003:409) notes that "the WTC came "to represent the inequality and injustice so many associ-

ated with the US dominated, neoliberal 'New World Order'." As noted, the Twin Towers had enormous symbolic resonance as representations of American economic power, and even of America itself. Therefore, it seems that the WTC would have presented an obvious choice for a terrorist group wishing to target America's economic 'New World Order'. Supporting this line of thought, Greenberg (2003) and Bird (2003) suggest that the political and economic power embodied in the WTC contributed to its selection as a target in 2001, and it seems not unreasonable to suppose that its iconic image played a role in the 1993 attack as well. Indeed, in a video released by Osama bin Laden following the 2001 attacks there is mention of targeting America's "greatest buildings" (Greenberg 2003; Wigley 2002). Further, Bird (2003) and Greenberg (2003) argue that the total economic damage from the attacks cannot be explained by their physical destruction alone; the political and economic damage inflicted by the destruction of a key icon of America's power is, arguably, immeasurable.

Raising 'Ground Zero'

The Towers' symbolic significance was altered in many ways following September 11. Indeed, Scully (quoted in Nobel 2005:42) claims that "when [the Towers] got hit, all the associations changed". It appears that the Twin Towers' negative symbolic significance was downplayed, or changed altogether, in favour of more positive associations. For instance, Nobel (2005) argues that the WTC assumed a human character as its image was linked in popular culture to the images of rescue workers and firefighters, in contrast to the inscription of modernist architectural inhumanity critics had earlier identified. Furthermore, Greenberg (2003:413) argues that New Yorkers who had been "excluded from the starkly rosy version of the city" that the WTC represented were able to overlook the contradictions between its economic symbolism and their own social reality, feeling a "familial sense of loss" when it fell. Almost immediately after the September 2001 attack the WTC site took on yet another symbolic inscription, 'Ground Zero'. A term attached to annihilation of place, but also to the potential of a new beginning (Hajer, 2005).

Renewed emphasis on the positive aspects of the Twin Towers' symbolism is also present in plans for the site's renewal. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) (2007), the agency determining the site's future along with the Port Authority, notes that "Revitalizing Lower Manhattan" is one of its explicit aims. This goal precisely mirrors one of the Port Authority's original intentions. The Twin Towers' original symbolic purpose of conveying America's economic might is also an intended outcome of 'Ground Zero's' (re)design. "Freedom Tower," a name that recalls the original Twin Towers' positive associations with freedom, will recapture the original WTC's symbolism of American freedom and democracy in its height of 1,776 feet, a numerical reference to the year of the Declaration of Independence (Nobel 2005). The official address, One World Trade Centre, 'Freedom Tower' comprises 104 stories and 3 million square feet. The largest, tallest, of all the New York World



Figure 2: Freedom Tower (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Freedom_Tower_New.jpg)

Trade Center buildings. Freedom Tower is now the tallest building in America. Occupancy of the building will undoubtedly be challenged by the tragic history of the site. At just 50% leased space (2013), Silverstein Properties, the building's owner, are advertising Freedom Tower as an "indelible New York landmark". Yet, unlike the original WTC, to attract new occupants the building's owner are promoting more than a desirable address. The owner has made building safety a priority for this location by advertising Freedom Tower's advantage of "structural redundancy, fireproofing, biochemical filters, extra-wide pressurized stairs and optimal firefighter access". Homeland Security necessitates office place safety.

Freedom Tower's original architect, Daniel Libeskind, was inspired by another symbol of American freedom and strength: the Statue of Liberty (Nobel 2005; Kogod and Osman 2003), and although his design has been modified, the symbolic reference to the Statue's raised torch remains in Freedom Tower's spire, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Kogod and Osman (2003:113) have criticized the use of these symbolic elements as "melodramatic" and overwrought, implying that the design is too overtly symbolic. However, though it may have been overdone, Freedom Tower's emphasis on freedom and power demonstrates that the original Towers' positive associations became reinforced following the September 2001 attack. Completion of Freedom Tower (2014) was technically complex with high economic stakes. Respect for victim's families was politically sensitive over the entire period of construction. Now, at completion, we know what 'Ground Zero' looks like, but what will it symbolize and what global message will go forth from this place. Time will decide.

Conclusion

The Twin Towers had symbolic associations in America and worldwide, with considerable political and economic effects. Although these associations of economic power and individual freedom had positive significance for some, others saw them as symbols of political economic domination. Clearly, the economic strength that the Twin Towers came to symbolize attracted more than architectural critiques. The negative symbolism of global political economic domination, even arrogance, presented these towers as a target by those claiming responsibility for the September 11 attack. Moreover, the positive symbolic significance of the towers came to the fore after the attack, as demonstrated by plans for re-developing 'Ground Zero'. If the experience of the original Twin Towers is any indication, Freedom Tower will acquire the same conflicting and unexpected, perhaps undesired, symbolic connotations in the future. The

similarities between the intentions of the old and new projects lead us to wonder if Freedom Tower will not gain the associations of economic strength and arrogance that made the original WTC a target of terrorism.

Although it may be impossible to prevent negative associations with iconic structures, a better understanding of architectural symbolism, particularly of iconic structures, may help to inform our understanding of how the built environment influences human behavior. In particular, planners and designers should be mindful of symbolic connotations imbued with built form, both positive and negative. Indeed, symbolic architectural representations such as Freedom Tower can have very tangible consequences, as the history of the Twin Towers has proven.

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