



Kennedy School of Government Case Program

Listening to the City:

Rebuilding New York's World Trade Center Site

When the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center collapsed after terrorists crashed hijacked airplanes into the two buildings on September 11, 2001, the city, the state, and the nation immediately launched an unprecedented rescue and recovery operation. Behind the scenes, officials also began planning to reconstruct the key 16-acre site at the tip of Lower Manhattan—a job that promised to be the largest urban development project in US history. Two public agencies shared responsibility for redeveloping the World Trade Center site: the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and a newly created Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was a financially self-supporting public agency that owned the world trade center site and managed many of the region's airports, tunnels, and bridges. The governors of New York and New Jersey each appointed six members to its board. The Port Authority completed the World Trade Center in 1973, and managed it until

This case is based upon "Listening to the City: Rebuilding at New York City World Trade Center Site" (KSG 1687.0 and 1687.1, 2003). It was originally written by Susan Rosegrant for Archon Fung, Associate Professor of Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and then edited by Fung. Funding was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and by the Center for Ethics and the Professions, Harvard University. (0203)

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July 2001, when it leased the complex to a group led by developer Larry Silverstein for a period of 99 years. Insiders say the Authority's agenda was clear: to rebuild all of the World Trade Center's lost commercial space, both out of a sense of institutional pride and in order to continue collecting \$120 million in annual rent from its tenants.

Because the rebuilding task in Lower Manhattan was so immense, officials decided to form a new reconstruction entity. New York Governor George Pataki and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani jointly announced the creation of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) in November 2001 to oversee the rebuilding of Downtown, south of Houston Street. Although it was understood that LMDC and the Port Authority would both work together, Pataki didn't define a division of responsibilities. Observers generally applauded Pataki's choice of John Whitehead to chair LMDC. The former State Department official and Goldman Sachs co-chairman was seen as a principled public figure without a personal agenda in the redevelopment. From his appointment, Whitehead insisted that the rebuilding process would be deliberate, transparent, and open to public input.

The Program

When the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) began to look at what would rise from the ruins in Lower Manhattan, staff "realized, and the board agreed, that since everything was so new and the mandate was very broad and extremely important, we'd better do a lot of listening before we did a lot of talking and decision-making," said Whitehead. In this unprecedented task, it was unclear to them which public goals and values their expertise in planning and development ought to serve. LMDC thus announced that it would set up eight advisory councils to represent key constituencies—families; residents; restaurants, retailers, and small businesses; arts, education and tourism; financial services firms; professional firms; commuters and transportation; and development.

At the end of March, LMDC issued a request for proposals (RFP), based in part upon ideas from these councils, for a land use design for the World Trade Center site. According to RFP author and LMDC Vice President Alexander Garvin, LMDC hoped to attract proposals not just from established corporate design firms, but also from a number of small, cutting-edge architects who might produce innovative and unconventional solutions. That intent, however, was never tested. As soon as the RFP went out, the Port Authority protested, claiming that it had not been consulted. LMDC pulled the RFP days later.

On April 19, the Port Authority issued a new RFP “in cooperation with” LMDC for an urban design and transportation study for Lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center site. The more conservative hand of the Port Authority was clear in the document, observers say. With decades of experience in building and managing enormous public works in the region, the Port Authority was more confident than LMDC in its professional view of what should be rebuilt, and how it should be done. They favored time-tested design principles and proven expertise. Those submitting proposals had to have a minimum of ten years’ experience in urban planning, a strong regional presence in the greater New York/New Jersey area, and either planning experience with large urban mixed-use complexes or been the prime consultant on three or more public works projects valued at more than \$100 million.

There thus appeared to be a fundamental disparity between the two agencies’ with regard both to the decision-making process that should guide reconstruction and substantive priorities. In early April, LMDC had published draft Principles for Action and a 14-point Preliminary Blueprint for Renewal. These documents drew upon and reflected suggestions from LMDC’s own advisory councils and ideas that had surfaced in the public debate, including a pledge to adhere to an inclusive and open public process, and recommendations to expand residential development and reintegrate the site with surrounding neighborhoods by restoring at least part of the street grid.

While the Port Authority didn't reject those ideas, it had a different vision of the reconstruction process and therefore different objectives. Since the World Trade Center fell, insiders say, the Authority had been committed to what was known internally as the Program—the requirement that all the commercial space that had been lost would be rebuilt on the site, thus sustaining the \$120 million annual revenue stream from the lease on the twin towers.¹ Specifically, that meant rebuilding 11 million square feet of office space, and 600,000 square feet of retail, as well as a 600,000-square-foot hotel.² Without the lease revenue, officials said, the authority might have been forced to cut its \$9.5 billion five-year capital plan by as much as \$1.5 billion.³

But the Port Authority and LMDC did their best to present a united front. On May 22, a design group headed by Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners won the urban planning contract for the World Trade Center site. Port Authority instructed them to abide by the constraints of the Program.⁴

A Growing Public Response

During these months, non-governmental groups such as the Civic Alliance sought to create a public debate about the World Trade Center site redevelopment. They retained AmericaSpeaks, a Washington, D.C.-based organizer of “21st Century Town Meetings,” to help design and facilitate events.⁵

¹ Silverstein's group was still making the lease payments with the proceeds of insurance payouts.

² While Silverstein's lease was for 10 million square feet of office space, other small leases brought the total to just over 11 million. The 600,000 square feet of retail, meanwhile, resulted from Westfield's contractual right to expand its original allotment of 450,000 by 30 percent.

³ Planned capital projects included improvements in regional airports, bridges, tunnels, and the PATH transit system, as well as a program to deepen channels to the authority's maritime ports.

⁴ Beyer Blinder Belle, known for such major jobs as the restoration of Grand Central Terminal, headed a design group that included a transportation consultant and eleven other firms.

⁵ AmericaSpeaks didn't agree to stage the meeting until the Civic Alliance promised to invite representatives from LMDC, the city's Economic Development Corporation, and other official policy making agencies.

AmericaSpeaks had developed an approach to public deliberation that attempted to combine the depth and intimacy of small group discussions with the power of large group consensus. Participants—carefully recruited to be inclusive and diverse—divide into small groups to deliberate over policy concerns and vote on discussion questions. After the groups send their ideas and input via computers to a team of analysts to synthesize and tabulate for the larger assembly’s approval, AmericaSpeaks delivers the results to sponsoring officials.⁶ According to AmericaSpeaks leaders, these electronic town meetings allowed a wide range of citizens to contribute to important public debates, and so improved policy-making.

On February 7, more than 600 participants, representing a broad cross-section of the region, gathered at the South Street Seaport on the eastern side of Lower Manhattan for “Listening to the City,” as the meeting was named.⁷ Civic Alliance leader and co-founder Robert Yaro notes that the session was the first opportunity for officials from the LMDC to meet at one time with Port Authority leaders, representatives of recently elected Mayor Michael Bloomberg, as well as small business owners, relatives of victims, members of the various civic groups hoping to influence the process, and the general public. “There had been smaller meetings of neighborhood residents and of families, but it was the first time that all of the stakeholders had a chance to be there and to listen to each other,” said Yaro.

According to organizers, the goal of the meeting was not to make hard decisions nor to debate issues like how many towers Silverstein should rebuild, but to develop a vision for how Lower Manhattan should look in a decade. Participants sat in groups of ten or twelve, with a trained facilitator for each table. Each participant had a simple numbered keypad for polling, and each table had a laptop computer, with one person designated as the scribe. As tables

⁶ Prior AmericaSpeaks projects included engaging citizens in creating the strategic plan and budget for Mayor Anthony Williams of Washington, D.C., and orchestrating a national dialogue on Social Security reform.

discussed questions about the future of the World Trade Center site and Lower Manhattan, the scribes captured the essence of conversations—including both consensus ideas and strongly-held individual views—and sent that information to a group known as the “theme team.”⁸ The theme team then identified the key concepts that emerged from all the discussions, and presented them to the entire room for corrections and additions, rejections and endorsements.

The “visions” that ultimately emerged from Listening to the City echoed many of the recommendations articulated by groups like New York New Visions and the Civic Alliance. According to participants, planners should redevelop the World Trade Center site and Lower Manhattan as a 24-hour, mixed-use community; construct low- and moderate-income housing; increase services and amenities; build a new transportation hub and improve connections to other parts of Manhattan and the region; create more open space and access to the waterfront; and make sure that the memorial and the events of September 11 informed future development in the area. These priorities departed strikingly from the concern with financial stability and revenue in the Port Authority’s program.

Afterward, Louis Tomson, LMDC’s president and executive director, told AmericaSpeaks President Carolyn Lukensmeyer that LMDC would co-sponsor a second Listening to the City meeting in the summer, as soon as concrete land use plans could be put before the public.

Planning the Second Town Meeting

Organizers dramatically raised their hopes and expectations for that second meeting. By May, AmericaSpeaks had already decided to invite 4,000 to 5,000 participants, primarily to accommodate widespread interest and to collect a large amount of information, but also to gain

⁷ In addition to the Civic Alliance, the co-conveners were New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, the Regional Plan Association, and the New School University’s Milano Graduate School.

media attention. “The New York media market is very competitive,” says project manager Ashley Boyd, “and a 1,000-person meeting doesn’t make headline news.”

While public meetings can draw quite unrepresentative participants, AmericaSpeaks “aimed to create a universe that would reflect people who had worked in the Trade Center, who lived in the area, and who were impacted economically, which included all the boroughs and the closest suburbs of Connecticut and New Jersey,” says Boyd. AmericaSpeaks took demographic data from those locations as a starting point, but tried to draw extra participants from Lower Manhattan, as well as from groups such as rescue workers, and family members of those killed in the attacks. “Part of the reason why traditional public participation processes have not been as effective as they might have been is because they draw the usual suspects,” explains Boyd.

For the first Listening to the City meeting in February, the Civic Alliance had been the primary sponsor and had controlled the meeting’s content. This time, however, LMDC and the Port Authority were funding about half of the \$2 million event, and expected substantial control.⁹ Bringing these diverse sponsors together proved extremely taxing. AmericaSpeaks, the Civic Alliance, Port Authority, and the Civic Alliance differed regarding the substance of material that would be included in a common discussion guide for participants. It was more difficult still for these groups to agree upon a common agenda for the day. “I’ve never gone through a design process that was so politicized and where there were so many battles over things like sequence of activities,” says Daniel Stone. Of particular concern was the question of who would set the agenda and what the bounds of discussion would be. LMDC was determined to present the site plans in the morning when attendance was likely to be highest, and before reporters left to file their stories after lunch. The Civic Alliance, however, insisted that site decisions couldn’t be made outside of the context of the larger goals of redevelopment, and that those macro issues had

⁸ AmericaSpeaks assembled a diverse team from individuals who could review the public input objectively.

to go first. After a number of testy meetings, LMDC finally claimed the prime morning spot, but with the compromise that the day would begin with an open-ended question about the values that should influence development at the site and in Lower Manhattan, thus allowing discussion of the Civic Alliance's central concerns.

Listening to the City: Public Agencies Meet the Public

On July 20, some 4,300 people gathered at the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Lower Manhattan for the second Listening to the City electronic town meeting.¹⁰ As LMDC and the Civic Alliance had agreed, Robert Yaro launched the meeting with a presentation about social equity issues in Lower Manhattan, and then invited participants to discuss hopes and concerns about rebuilding and remembering. Following presentations on urban planning, the six site options, and requirements of the Program,¹¹ participants discussed criticisms and recommendations, first, with the Program in place, and, second, without those constraints. "If you didn't give people a chance to comment about that," says Stone, "people who were upset about the Program were going to use all their time talking about what they didn't like about the Program, and not talking about the site options within the Program."

Participants expressed broad approval of some aspects of each of the plans. Many liked the expansion of open green space that all provided. Many also endorsed the long pedestrian promenade featured in three of the plans connecting the Trade Center site to Battery Park. In a straw poll taken with the wireless keypads, over 80 percent of respondents thought that it was

⁹ Corporate and foundation sponsors donated the other \$1 million. The \$2 million total covered all aspects, including planning; participant recruitment; computer rentals; lunch; child care; and translation services.

¹⁰ A second, much smaller meeting two days later attracted about 200 participants, and about 800 people took part in an online dialogue over the following two weeks.

¹¹ In addition to the commercial space obligations, the Program mandated a memorial; new open space; cultural and civic institutions; a permanent PATH terminal and Downtown concourse; a bus facility; service and loading areas; and power and other utilities.

“very important” or “important” to reconnect the east and west sections of Lower Manhattan through pedestrian access.

However, the symbolic stakes of reconstruction quickly became clear in divisions among discussants. Many participants approved of plans that preserved the footprints of the two towers as open space because building there would desecrate sacred ground. Participants at one table, for example, hoped to “convince people not to build on the footprint” because “some people will never be recovered.” But given the scarcity of land in lower Manhattan, and the difficulty of constructing a memorial and reconnecting the street grid while leaving the footprints clear, others argued that a blanket prohibition against building on the large areas was unwise. One participant pointed out that the reconstruction of cities such as London after World War II did not disrespect the fallen, and that “it’s not practical to leave the footprints untouched.” At the extreme, several argued that the two towers should be rebuilt to their original specifications, and that to do less would be to concede a kind of defeat to the attackers.

As conversations developed through the day, however, a surprising level of agreement emerged regarding priorities and values that should have guided the reconstruction effort. Many rejected the very premises of the Port Authority’s Program. Those seated at one table said that they “felt constrained by the pre-requisite criteria of the ‘plan,’ and that the six plans as presented are largely six versions of one way of looking at the problem, rather than six discrete, visionary proposals to set our minds working.” Another wrote more simply that “current leases [and] owners should not dictate future development possibilities! Should not be a business-driven project—public interests come first.”

Beyond excessive commercial space, many participants also felt that the six plans lacked architectural verve. One table complained, “all six current plans are unacceptable because they are uninspiring [and have] no significant skyline.” Separate tables converged in their

opinion of both the plans and the quality of upstate architecture when they wrote that the plans were “boring, dull, bland—too much like the Albany South Mall;” that they looked “too much like Albany state government buildings – bland;” and that “they all look like Albany (no offense).”

A significant number of those attending also felt that the plans, and the planning process, did not sufficiently emphasize the importance of building a memorial to those killed on September 11. One table wrote that the “memorial structure should be planned first [and] all other building subsequent to those decisions.” Because concrete preparation for the memorial had not yet begun, however, many participants were puzzled by the connection between a yet-to-be-planned memorial and the site plans they had reviewed in the morning. Criticizing the existing process, almost 80 percent of participants responded that it was “very important” or “important” that the planning of the memorial be linked to the planning of the rest of the site. While both the LMDA and Port Authority had focused upon the alternative commercial, residential, transport, and other practical uses of the area, the priority of the memorial emerged as a significant theme in the public discussion.

Toward the end of the day, in the Civic Alliance-led segment, titled “Rebuilding Lives,” the conversation expanded to issues beyond physical reconstruction. When participants were asked to discuss the alternative goals and courses of action that should guide the revitalization of Lower Manhattan, many stressed the importance of building a robust, mixed-used neighborhood. New York should “create a 24/7 community that did not previously exist in order to invigorate Lower Manhattan and create a more dynamic environment for all inhabitants and visitors,” one table wrote. That around-the-clock community, many added, ought to include people of all classes: “middle income people who work in the city should be able to actually LIVE in the city [so] affordable housing is a must.” Most participants also agreed that the

reconstructed area should include many more amenities—grocery stores, restaurants, schools, libraries, laundromats, and parks—than existed before September 11.

Before the meeting began, some observers had worried that extreme opinions would dominate the day. But while differences plainly existed, most observers say the debate remained productive. “To me the extraordinary thing was there were 4,000 to 5,000 people debating urban design,” recalls Alexander Garvin. “Never in the history of planning had that happened before.” Moreover, what ultimately emerged from the hundreds of intense discussions was a clear and unambiguous consensus: None of the site plans provided a satisfactory setting for the memorial, and, says Carolyn Lukensmeyer, “it was a unanimous rejection of the Program.” She adds: “LMDC wanted to learn as much as they could about the public’s evaluation of the elements that made up those concept plans, and they got that information.”

John Whitehead, who observed the meeting carefully, describes the day as “wonderful,” despite the stinging dismissal. “In spite of the fact that they were criticizing our plans,” he says, “I’ve never seen an expression of true democracy as good as that represented.” But the across-the-board condemnation of the six site plans, and the repudiation of the Program, took the Port Authority by surprise, observers say. “They saw it as a setup,” says one LMDC official. “They saw it as LMDC using the Port Authority as a lightning rod for all the opposition, and they felt betrayed.” For the historically isolated authority officials to be exposed to that kind of public scrutiny, the official says, was like “bats flying around in the daytime.”

Still, despite the group’s strong consensus, and officials’ apparent willingness to listen, many participants doubted that anything had been accomplished. When asked at the end of the meeting whether they believed decision makers would take their input seriously, only one-third

of voters said they were confident or very confident they would do so.¹² “One of the people at the table I was sitting at was saying, ‘They’re never going to listen, they’re going through the motions,’” one said.

¹² Forty-five percent said they were somewhat confident and 22 percent had little confidence. When Robert Yaro of the Civic Alliance summed up the results by saying that more than 80 percent of participants believed their voices would be heard, the shouting crowd set him straight.

Epilogue

The barrage of press coverage following the July 2002 Listening to the City meeting forced officials to heed the priorities that emerged from that public discussion. Within a week, Governor George Pataki declared that some of the lost commercial space should be rebuilt off site, saying he would “urge the Port Authority and Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) to look beyond just the 16 acres.”¹³ In August, LMDC officials announced the schedule for a new design study that emphasized creativity and risk-taking on the part of firms.

In October, LMDC, the Port Authority, and the city jointly announced a new program that revised the previous commercial space requirements. The program, which Robert Yaro of the Civic Alliance dubbed “World Trade Center Lite,” cut mandated office space by one million square feet, and allowed designers to reduce the amount of office space that had to be on site by about 40 percent, to 6.5 million square feet.¹⁴ Designers were also asked to include an underground transit hub, to add visual interest to the skyline with at least one tall tower, and to plan for depressing West Street under a promenade. The guidelines noted a “strong preference” for keeping the footprints of the towers free for a memorial. “Very seldom do you see big public authorities, number one, engage in a process like this, and number two, pay attention to the results,” says Yaro. “It’s an extraordinary achievement.”

On December 18, LMDC and the Port Authority presented nine new land use plans.¹⁵ “Unlike the initial group of proposals released by the agency last July,” wrote *New York Times*

¹³ Edward Wyatt, “Pataki Calls for More Flexibility on Rebuilding at Ground Zero,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2002.

¹⁴ Retail and hotel requirements remained the same, but included the option of expanding them to one million square feet each.

¹⁵ Edward Wyatt, “Visions for Ground Zero: Overview; 7 Design Teams Offer New Ideas for Attack Site,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2002.

architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, “these plans throb with energy, imagination, intelligence and the sheer thrill of contributing to a battered city’s rebirth.”¹⁶

Some critics, including Eva Hanhardt of Imagine New York and Ronald Shiffman of the Civic Alliance, still believed that officials were moving forward precipitously on land use plans before developing an overall vision for Lower Manhattan. Although the Libeskind plan had responded powerfully to many of the architectural issues raised by Listening to the City, the design didn’t address the social issues—such as affordable housing and an increase in neighborhood services—that emerged from Listening to the City.

Although AmericaSpeaks and some civic groups had lobbied for another Listening to the City meeting, LMDC and Port Authority officials said there would not be a third event. However, according to John Whitehead, LMDC chairman, the agency would continue to find ways to reach out to the public. Alexander Garvin concurs, claiming that the events of September 11 had underlined the importance of involving citizens in public policy decisions. “This was an attack on democracy, and we need to demonstrate to the world how a democracy functions,” he says. “There’s no choice here.”

¹⁶ Herbert Muschamp, “Visions for Ground Zero: An Appraisal; The Latest Round of Designs Rediscover and Celebrate the Vertical Life,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2002.