

Eye Was There: From the World Trade Center to the Freedom Tower¹

Devrim Kılıçer Yarangümeli

Fear can cause blindness, said the girl with dark glasses, Never a truer word, that could not be truer, we were already blind the moment when we turned blind, fear struck us blind, fear will keep us blind, Who is speaking, asked the doctor, A blind man, replied a voice, just a blind man, for that is all we have here.

Jóse Saramago, *Blindness*

Architecture, as one of the most powerful and familiar forms of visual communication, occupies a major place in visual culture. American architect Daniel Libeskind, who is the winner of the master plan for rebuilding Ground Zero, clarifies the point when he says: “I believe that design and architecture are the foremost communicators of all—they tell a story. Without them, there would be no history, no reference about where we are, where we have been and where we are going; not only as individuals but as a society” (Libeskind, “News”). Furthermore, Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” holds architecture above any other art form arguing that many other art forms have developed and perished in time, but not architecture (239). Benjamin underlines that the human need for shelter is lasting; therefore, the art of creating spaces, architecture has never been idle (240). He writes that “[architecture’s] claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art” (240).

Architecture develops hand in hand with powers of civilization. In building the first house people began to create, and equally important, began to control their own environment. In this light, architecture has arisen from the primitive hut in the humans’ need and desire to have a say in their surroundings. Also, in this way people have been able to communicate their needs and desires in their dwelling places, and architectural products. Architectural products also leave a

¹ This article has been derived from the author’s Ph.D. dissertation titled “Symbolic and Ontological Meanings of Skyscraper New York City in American Culture.”

significant mark in the history of civilizations: “the characteristic buildings of each period are the memorials to their greatest institutions” (Mumford 193). Each community then communicates its needs through the environment they build.

In its more inclusive sense, an understanding and engagement with architecture is fundamental to any comprehensive understanding of culture. Buildings express the human capacity to organize and control the environment within which they live and thus to articulate their cultural world. One can argue that it is through architecture that cultures express and understand themselves and others. Equally important is the fact that the built environment is the product of power relations within the community that created it: “Architecture is not the autonomous art it is often held out to be. Buildings are designed and constructed within a complex web of social and political concerns. To ignore the conditions under which architecture is practiced is to fail to understand the full social import of architecture” (Leach 14). Yet it is often hard to find architectural texts that do not represent buildings as merely technical objects or art objects. Architectural discourse needs to see buildings in their social form, as social, political and psychological objects in that they are invested with social meaning and shape social relations.

Architectural space is a medium through which to understand society. As German cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer argues in “On Employment Agencies: The Construction of Space:” “Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself” (60). Obviously space is mediated by consciousness, and architecture is the product of a way of thinking. Space is never empty, as Foucault observes in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” it is always “saturated with qualities” (349).

The fact that the skyscraper is an American invention; its full social import will reflect economic, social, political and also symbolic and psychological concerns of Americans. Skyscrapers as architectural forms are the products of a way of seeing and envisioning the American way. Further, an individual’s perception of buildings or the built environment is mediated through his/her consciousness. In attempting to expose the forces by which the built environment is generated and perceived, psychoanalysis provides a necessary lens to address the whole question of the social import that skyscrapers have, and it becomes an indispensable tool in getting to understand a certain form of architecture and the mind frame of a society that has invented it. Moreover, psychoanalysis deconstructs unconscious controlling mechanisms both in the human mind

and in society. Accordingly, skyscrapers as modern images of towers function as a metaphor for social guardians, and in their essential phallic form they stand as antitheses to the psychoanalytic metaphor of the house as a womb, where all human beings belong. Moreover, skyscrapers fuse the idea of power with masculinity in their essentially erect form. The effects of this type of architecturally symbolic guardianship go unnoticed for the most part in everyday life practices. It is the main interest of this article to examine the power of architectural visibility in American culture through a psychoanalytic lens focusing on the skyscraper form and taking the fallen Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the Freedom Tower as its case study.

It goes without saying that towers are phallic images. The phallus, we know, is a familiar symbol of fertility and regeneration. In the work of numerous critics more or less associated with psychoanalysis, the phallus is not necessarily the masculine organ itself but the values associated with it, specifically that of power. In Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is the constant threat of castration that the phallus takes on its symbolic function, and the phallus is thus always a reactive and defensive construct: if it claims the status of a transhistorical truth, this is always in some fraught relationship to the sense in which it is imagined to be “under attack.” Therefore, the phallus is not a timeless entity with no historical content but a kind of hastily improvised patchwork of historical materials that might vary according to historical contingencies such as the mournful reassertion of national identity in the wake of World War I, the reassertion of a triumphant global capitalist order in the face of attacks on it on September 11, 2001.

If it is a patchwork, it would become impossible to assert that the phallus represents any one thing monolithically. To call it a phallus necessarily seems to imply that it has a gendered meaning, but this would have to be seen as overdetermined by other elements such as national identity, capitalism and the like in ways which would make any reading of it necessarily a tracing of those polysemantic overdeterminations. Insofar as the skyscrapers of Manhattan exhibit and engender desire and power through the dominant phallic and therefore a visual spatiality, the dispersal of power in its diffuse and symbolic forms are manifested through the idea of the phallus.

The threat of castration or rupture is in fact the lack of center and origin that makes any structure a site of eternal deferral of meaning. Rupture thus drives the productive nature of structure and makes meaning possible as a dynamic process at the same time as it makes meaning indeterminate. Just as for Freud the phallus might be seen as always reflecting and repeating the very

loss of the father that it tries to cover over, rupture re-emerges at every moment through the deferral of meaning rather than being some moment of originary or archetypal loss. What one might object to Freud is the fact that the connection of the phallus as the arbitrator of meaning to the determinate element of the penis is in itself the “erection” of a center and “prototype” of loss, for which all other losses then only become figures or copies. There can be no original loss which predetermines the nature of those that follow.

In the uncanny doubleness of the Twin Towers whose fall came to be the very symbols of the attacks in September 11, no originary reference remains. Baudrillard writes prophetically in 1983 in his *Simulations*:

The fact that there are two of them signifies the end of all competition, the end of all original reference. . . . What they project is the idea of the model that they are one for the other, and their twin altitude presents no longer any value of transcendence. They signify only that the strategy of models and commutations wins out in the very heart of the system itself—and New York is really the heart of it—over the traditional strategy of competition. (135-136)

Indeed when the project of a World Trade Center was being worked out during the 1960s, it was intended to put an end to all competition. The proposal for the World Trade Center reads: “Today, the world stands on the brink of a boom in international trade. . . . To realize its role in the new era dawning for overseas trade and finance, this country must marshal its resources. One primary step in this direction would be to establish *a single center*, planned and equipped to serve that vital purpose” (qtd. in Glanz and Lipton 7, emphasis mine). The idea of a “single center” does not only refer to the proposed buildings themselves but also to the country and the city they were going to be built in.

The World Trade Center has been the symbol of the U.S. economic strength. In the 1960s Chase Manhattan Bank’s Chairman David Rockefeller and his brother governor of New York State Nelson Rockefeller initiated the foundation of Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to commission a development project that would revitalize downtown New York which had been the financial center of the country. In 1962 architect Minoru Yamasaki was hired to head the design. Although Yamasaki believed that “If a building is too strong or brutal, it tends to overpower man. In it he feels insecure and uncomfortable” (qtd. in Glanz and Lipton 88), he designed two identical, huge, excessively simple

glass boxes. A great majority of the public and architectural critics protested these huge monoliths that cut off human activity on the streets, but they were also driven to it by its very height and identical doubleness. Therefore, not surprisingly enough, Michel de Certeau begins his chapter “Walking in the City” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) as such:

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into momentarily arrested vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. (91)

Thus the city turns into a text with the view from the tallest tower of the city. Being lifted up, means being “lifted out of the city’s grasp” (de Certeau 92) out of its streets. With the panoptic, all-seeing, god-like eye that encompasses the whole city, the subject on top of the tower assumes the power of the structure. The cityscape from the tower transforms the walking subject, the pedestrian, into a voyeur. De Certeau draws on psychoanalysis and Foucault in his reworking of the interrelationship between power relations, the built environment, the subject and the visual field. He invokes the scopophilic drive or “scopophilia” as Freud formulated it in “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.”

It is in the skyscraper’s exhibition of corporate power and wealth that they draw the subject’s desire to look. In the essays, Freud argues that “visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused” (69). Pleasure in looking becomes a perversion, according to Freud, in the form of voyeurism and its double exhibitionism: “anyone who is an exhibitionist in his unconscious is at the same time a *voyeur*” (81). Freud’s formulation as reworked by Lacan in the split between the organic eye and the gaze takes on a significant meaning in respect to towers. The towers with their soaring height incorporate a panoptic view of the city, gazing back at the walking subject. The gaze on part of the tower is aggressive since it belittles the one on the street, hence pouring out symbolic violence. This process is further underlined by Freud’s assertion that the force which opposes “scopophilia” is shame (*On Sexuality* 69). The towers of Manhattan are also voyeurs gazing back at the subject and exhibitionists in their “unashamed” display of power. This becomes more forceful in the case of the World Trade Center as the peak

of the vertical city, and as “the most monumental figure of Western urban development” (de Certeau 93).

Underlining the monumental aspect the Twin Towers reached a hundred and ten stories replacing the Empire State Building as the tallest, although super tall skyscrapers do not make much economic sense. Indeed, after their completion in 1972 and 1973 the Twin Towers became the world’s tallest buildings, only to be replaced by Chicago’s Sears Tower a year later. Although they were no longer the world’s tallest, they were the world’s largest in terms of rentable office space until their destruction. They stood taller than any other skyscraper in New York’s skyline and conveyed a symbolic message of American success and achievement. They stood as a symbol of America’s financial power and as a symbol of American culture. *Washington Post* columnist Benjamin Forgey suggests that, “buildings—their shapes, materials, textures and spaces—represent culture in its most persuasive physical form. Destroy the buildings, and you rob a culture of its memory, of its legitimacy, of its right to exist.” After their destruction the Twin Towers came to represent destruction and terror in a traumatized city.

The fall of New York’s Twin Towers was voted “the most memorable TV moment” of the past fifty years in a recent poll conducted in Britain, proving to be more *memorable* than Neil Armstrong’s televised landing on the moon in 1969 and the fall of the Berlin Wall twenty years later. Princess Diana’s funeral took the second place in the poll (Reuters). Artist Damien Hirst was cited in an article in *The Guardian* (September 11, 2002) that he in an interview told BBC News Online that the attacks were designed to be watched giving way to a fierce controversy: “The thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of an artwork in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually” (Allison). *The New York Times* (September 11, 2002) cites Kenneth T. Jackson, the President of *New-York Historical Society*, as saying that September 11 has become “the most documented event in human history” (Boxer). David Levi-Strauss in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (2003) reports that “On September 11th, more people clicked on documentary news photographs than on pornography for the first (and only) time in the history of the Internet” (184). What was it that made people all over the world become so immersed with the event? There is obviously more than one way to answer the question, and none of these answers can afford to ignore the power of visuality involved.

The fall of the Twin Towers has also been often referred to as a reminder of the Tower of Babel. It is important to remember why people had built the Tower of Babel: To preserve their name, and to avoid being scattered in judgment. Here one might see the principle behind the first and not the last tower: whenever human beings seek to reassert their own imaginary power and authority (phallus) they again and again construct a tower, a defense against the threat of castration in the form of a fetish object. As Freud explains in "Fetishism" (1927), the fetish is a substitute for the phallus: woman's (mother's) penis that the little boy does not want to give up. The fetish becomes a token of triumph over the threat of castration and serves as a protection against it, which necessarily implies a split in the subject's ego (952-956). However, the indeterminacy and overdetermination of the idea of the phallus should be underlined. The decenteredness of this idea can further thoughts about the precise ways in which Twin Towers functioned as a symbol not transhistorically but rather much more contingently in terms of national fetish, imagined "center" of a decentered and non-territorial global capitalism.

In the history of constructing high buildings the latest chain of the line is evident in New York City's redevelopment plans for Ground Zero, the site where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center once stood "erect." Within two months after the attacks the governor of New York George Pataki established a new state agency responsible for overseeing the rebuilding process: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC). LMDC's motto "Remember, Rebuild, Renew" underlines the desire to restore the phallus. LMDC Chairman John Whitehead said as he introduced the preliminary proposals for rebuilding the World Trade Center site: "We will rebuild. It is now not a question of whether, but a question of how" (CNN). Moreover, LMDC states its mission as "ensuring Lower Manhattan recovers from the attacks and emerges *even better than it was before . . . restoring a powerful, tall symbol* in Lower Manhattan's skyline" (LMDC, emphasis mine). Thus what Libeskind proposes is this phallic symbol embodied in the new tower, dubbed the "Freedom Tower" by Governor Pataki. This "powerful, tall symbol" will be 1,776-feet-tall, symbolizing the year of American independence. It will be the tallest building in the western hemisphere, that will be about 400 feet taller than the original Twin Towers, and about 100 feet taller than Taipei 101 of Taiwan (1,667 ft), the tallest of the world as of 2006.

In the “Design Plan for Freedom Tower”² Libeskind assures the LMDC that the new tower will become a “lasting icon and a symbol of renewal” to “recapture the skyline and establish a new civic icon for this city and our country” (LMDC-design plans). “The impulse to rebuild instantly captured the public imagination as an opportunity to express the resolve of the nation. Ground Zero, in other words, is already an ideologically charged site” (Ross 127). Indeed in its report “A Vision for Lower Manhattan” (2002), LMDC sets out the very ideology of rebuilding the tower: The design should serve the goal to underline the status of New York City as the destination of a pagan pilgrimage, as the destination of a quest for material success. Hence LMDC’s chosen plan, which “preserves and reveals the slurry walls of the bathtub of the World Trade Center site as a symbol and physical embodiment of the resilience of American democracy and freedom in withstanding the attacks of September 11th 2001” (LMDC-A Vision for Lower Manhattan) is another architectural venture to rebuild the very loss.

The guiding idea for Libeskind’s plan for rebuilding Ground Zero, which he calls “The Memory Foundations,” is a new architecture based on “democratic ideals” (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 43) embodied in his childhood remembrance of the Statue of Liberty. However, for Libeskind, in recapturing a sense of place and history, buildings should never be nostalgic; they should speak to the present and the future:

I am inspired by light, sound, invisible spirits, a distinct sense of place, a respect for history. We are all shaped by a constellation of realities and invisible forces, and if a building is to have a spiritual resonance, it has to reflect these things. No one knows how body and soul are connected, but connect them is what I try to do. I

² As Larry Silverstein, a real estate developer who had leased the Twin Towers a few weeks before the attacks, began to put on more pressure, economic worries have taken hold of the project. Also for security reasons Libeskind’s plan was changed by David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill who had been working for Silverstein from the beginning. With the changes, causing intense fights between Childs and Libeskind, the plan no longer has the slurry wall, the gardens, and the spire is replaced by an antenna tower. Libeskind is now only referred to as the master planner; David Childs is responsible for overseeing the rebuilding on behalf of Silverstein. However, as the rebuilding physically began only in the spring of 2006, and the Freedom Tower is expected to open in 2011 (a decade after the original towers were destroyed) no one can be sure what other changes might be done to the project. Therefore, though recognizing the fact that the original plan has been altered radically, the study at hand takes the original design as proposed by Libeskind as its basis.

draw from my own experience—it's what I know—and in doing so, I strive for a universality. (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 16)

Therefore what Libeskind sought to propose for Ground Zero was a future having strong footing in history. This is also an economic history, because with the fall of the Twin Towers downtown Manhattan lost ten million square feet of rentable office space. Since Ground Zero is in the heart of Manhattan's financial district "it was psychologically as well as economically vital to provide the area with a future, to move on from its traumatic past" (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 38). To move on, recreating the past³ was wrong, and what was called for was a reinterpretation. Libeskind implies that he did not want to make the same mistake Yamasaki made back in the 1960s, or competing architects were making in building a soaring, mega-structure that cut off life in the streets surrounding the building although they were revealing a strong sense of individuality, which is one of the basic tenets of American culture. Libeskind writes "[m]y aim was to mold the site into a coherent and symbolic whole by designing buildings that would ascend gradually in pattern. And I wanted not to build just another isolated building there, but to create a new neighborhood, a new harmonious community" (*Breaking Ground* 46).

With "Memory Foundations" Libeskind achieves three goals: he reserves the memory, looks into the future integrating life in the street to the building, and recreates the lost office space. By keeping the original slurry wall of the Twin Towers he creates a living memorial, because the slurry wall is "a metaphoric and a literal stay against chaos and destruction. In refusing to fall, it seemed to attest, perhaps as eloquently as the Constitution, to the unshakable foundations of democracy and the value of human life and liberty" (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 43). He remembers telling the audience in the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center where the final six proposals for Ground Zero is first made public in 2002:

I told them about what Nina [his wife] and I had seen in the slurry wall and the bedrock. And I told them that down in the pit, I thought back to my family's arrival in New York Harbor, just offshore from here, and that the memory of looking up at the Statue of Liberty had inspired part of my design. I envisioned five towers—tall but not

³ This is a fundamental defect which Libeskind saw in the other competing proposals that aimed to create an impressive high point, and ultimately to replace the Twin Towers.

too tall—arranged by increasing height, from south to north, so that they rose in a spiral with the same shape as the flame in Lady Liberty’s torch. And the tallest, I had decided, should rise to 1,776 feet, to commemorate the Declaration of Independence, which brought democracy into the modern world. I would fill the upper floors of the tower with botanical gardens, as a confirmation of life. (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 47)

In Libeskind’s plan there is a memorial site going into the bedrock of Manhattan and exposing the foundations of the Twin Towers, and a walkway along the slurry wall. Sheltering the slurry wall in an embrace is a museum and other cultural buildings. In remembrance of the rescue workers, police, and firefighters, there is a map on which the routes taken by “the heroes of the day” to arrive at the towers are traced. These lines are incorporated into the design by turning them into pathways opening out into the city from a public space at the intersection of Fulton and Greenwich streets, which Libeskind calls “September 11 Plaza.” There is also an even greater plaza, a triangular area that is proposed to become lower Manhattan’s largest public space. Libeskind calls it “The Wedge of Light” which is inspired by the ray of sunlight. Indeed Libeskind attaches great importance to light, he says: “temples were venerated not just as architecture, but as gods in stone; lit up, they seemed filled with life, animated by ideas, ideals. Light is divine” (Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* 55). Further, the plaza is defined by two lines: the first is a line of light that strikes on September 11 of every year precisely at 8:46 a.m.—the moment when the first plane crashed into the North Tower. The second line marks the spot where, at 10:28 a.m., the second tower fell. These two moments of September 11 defines “The Wedge of Light” that commemorates the events, united with another plaza called the “Park of Heroes.” Libeskind offers a towering spire of 1,776 feet with gardens tied to a seventy-story skyscraper. Because gardens are “a constant affirmation of life” a skyscraper “rises above its predecessors, reasserting the pre-eminence of freedom and beauty, restoring the spiritual peak to the city, creating an icon that speaks of [American] vitality in the face of danger and [American] optimism in the aftermath of tragedy” (Libeskind, WTC Design Study). His conclusion to “World Center Design Study” reads: “Life victorious” (WTC Design Study). Libeskind essentially appeals to the emotions of a traumatized public barely using an architectural term. In his choice of words he is more like a populist preacher than an architect in evoking the themes of memory and mourning, of commemoration and renewal, but what he skillfully

achieves is a blurring of the distinction between commemoration and commercial development (Goldberger 213).

Ada Louis Huxtable writes in “Don’t Blame the Architects” (June 7, 2003) in her column in *The Wall Street Journal* that Libeskind’s plan “struck a common nerve.” “One had the sense, at the presentation, of an end to an undefined yearning and search. You could tell by the sustained applause and tears that this is what people really wanted, and what New York needs. . . . Forget the additional time and expense of a competition, nothing will ever be better than this” (Huxtable). Through the lens of the initial reactions to the plans for rebuilding Ground Zero it seems that the rebuilding efforts become something less than a commercial venture and a more symbolically political act, an opportunity to recreate the national fetish.

Libeskind’s design is also important in that it “attains a perfect balance between aggression and desire” as the architecture critic of *The New York Times* Herbert Muschamp called it (qtd. in Goldberger 137). In the design’s phallic erectility aggression and desire meet. The phallus is a reactive, a defensive construct against the threat of castration. As the penetration of the hijacked jets into the Twin Towers on September 11 symbolically castrated them, the lost phallus, which was in fact never present, is doubly recreated with the erection of a taller tower on Ground Zero.

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