

Make Architecture Architecture Again

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1. “Trump Calls Freedom Tower ‘Disgusting’ and a ‘Pile of Junk,’” *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, NBC News, May 13, 2005.

2. Verena Dobnik, “Trump Sounds Off on World Trade Center,” *Associated Press*, May 19, 2005.

3. Sam Lubell, “Team Designing and Promoting New Design For World Trade Center,” *Architectural Record*, March 10, 2004.

4. Verena Dobnik, “Trump Sounds Off on World Trade Center.”

5. Katherine Clarke, “World Trade Center Starchitect Bjarke Ingels Would Have Built the Twin Towers back the Way They Were,” *New York Daily News*, June 11, 2015.

6. Bruno Latour, “Entre globalisés et passésistes, le match reste nu,” *Le monde*, November 12, 2016. Translated by Clara Soudan and Jaeyoon Park as “Two Bubbles of Unrealism: Learning from the Tragedy of Trump,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 17, 2016.

On the morning of May 18, 2005, Donald Trump held a press conference in the lobby of Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue to unveil his proposal for the new World Trade Center. Criticizing Daniel Libeskind – whom he had called “an egghead architect” – Trump derided the existing masterplan as “a junkyard, a series of broken-down angles that don’t match each other,” declaring it “the worst pile of crap architecture I’ve ever seen in my life.”¹ He went on to critique Libeskind’s Freedom Tower, which dedicated much of its top third to a lattice skin and a spire, describing the design as “essentially a skeleton,” and arguing, “If we rebuild the World Trade Center in the form of a skeleton, Freedom Tower, the terrorists win.”²

Trump’s own proposal was a familiar one. Initially developed by a group known as Team Twin Towers, Inc., led by television producer Randy Warner, engineer Kenneth Gardner, and architect Herbert Belton, it gained Trump’s full-throated support in early 2005 after he saw the model on a television show. Although nearly identical to Minoru Yamasaki’s design, the proposed towers were five stories taller, with double-layered steel enclosures, larger columns, and rather redundant structural supports, which the design team claimed would be much safer than the original Twin Towers.³ Standing in front of a nine-foot-tall model of what looked like the World Trade Center, labeled Twin Towers II in bold metallic letters, Trump proclaimed, “We want to rebuild the World Trade Center as the World Trade Center but better: a little bit taller, a lot stronger, just plain better.”⁴

The idea to rebuild the World Trade Center towers in their original image was put to rest soon after when construction of Freedom Tower – now the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill–designed One World Trade Center – began in April 2006. But even within the architecture community, some saw Twin Towers II as the ideal solution. In June 2015, Bjarke Ingels, whose 2 World Trade Center tower is now “in progress,” revealed that he would have preferred to “build the towers again the way they were.” He reasoned, “When you watch Tony Soprano drive out of the Holland Tunnel, he can see the towers in his rearview mirror. They looked very strong.”⁵

Trump’s vision for Ground Zero has a familiar ring today. Despite his naïveté, populist rhetoric, and questionable taste, his proposal was not merely about re-erecting the Twin Towers or restoring New York’s skyline, but also about reviving New



Donald Trump presents the Twin Towers II proposal for the World Trade Center site, New York, May 18, 2005. Photo: Chris Hondros. Courtesy Getty Images.

York’s glory days – returning it to a lost *heimat* and creating what Bruno Latour has called a “utopia of the past.”⁶ Trump sought to make New York New York again; he even created a website, www.MakeNYNYagain.com, to promote the reconstruction of the Twin Towers. It is no surprise, then, that his approach to architecture is more aligned with the populist architects of our time than with the avant-gardists. I fear that we will see more of this kind of “architecture” in the coming years: at its best, a fetishization of the past, reducing architecture to a mere image; at its worst, a political mechanism to augment a lamented reality that no longer exists.

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