

NY TIMES OP-ED

Build It Again

By Greg Manning

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THE need to move the Freedom Tower set off a wave of dissatisfaction with the plans for ground zero that I hope builds until it sweeps away not just the tower, but also the "Reflecting Absence" memorial and the surrounding sloped-roof skyscrapers.

Why? Because the current plans for ground zero are flawed. They have nothing to do with 9/11. They recall a tragedy that occurred in the sky by focusing our memories on a hole in the ground. After three years spent seeking alternatives, the most appropriate way to commemorate the tragedy at the World Trade Center is, as Donald Trump suggests, to rebuild it.

I say this as someone who, along with my wife, Lauren, worked in the twin towers. I was with Euro Brokers on the 84th floor of the south tower, and Lauren was a partner at Cantor Fitzgerald on the 105th floor of the north tower. I was late that morning, so I was not there when the second jet tore through our trading floor. But Lauren was engulfed by the fireball that blew out the lobby of the north tower after the first plane hit. She managed to run outside, where a bond salesman helped extinguish the flames and start her on her grim battle to survive her burns.

Hundreds of our friends and colleagues died in the attacks. So for us it has been frustrating to see officials make redevelopment choices that do little more than finish off the demolition of what used to be.

Daniel Libeskind's design was dominated by the 16-acre void he saw on his first visit, an artifact not of Sept. 11, 2001, but of eight months later. He gave significance to the slurry wall, an architectural plumbing feature not visible until long after the destruction. His Freedom Tower mourns the lost New York icons with a spire that mirrors Jersey City's Exchange Place Center across the river; and the sloped roofs of the other buildings highlight the emptiness.

The memorial, "Reflecting Absence," is similarly misdirected, sending waterfalls tumbling to reflecting pools in underground chambers. The design and its revisions -- among them repatriating Fritz Koenig's sculpture "Sphere for Plaza Fountain," which once proudly anchored the Trade Center plaza, only to bury it below ground -- miss the point by forcing mourners into a subterranean warren.

When my wife and I visit or pass by the site today, we may gape at the emptiness but our gaze is drawn upward. We imagine things as they were, the dead and the injured still living and working above. Many bereft families view the footprints as the sacred repose of their

loved ones, yet with the greatest tenderness and love for those lost and injured, we suggest that to return to the sacred space, we need to return to the sky.

It would be infinitely more poignant to visit memorial gardens on the rooftops of paired and rebuilt towers, to feel the winds that made the towers sway, to stand literally where our friends and loved ones stood, see the same sky they saw, the same twin panoramas of a glorious and vibrant New York. To share the context that filled their lives, not the earth that marked their deaths.

And rebuilding the towers liberates us to place the memorial park where it belongs: where the old World Trade Center Plaza used to be, with the sphere above ground, restored to the center. The sculpture's scars are real, not metaphorical. It honors not only the deceased, but also the injured survivors. And the circles of walls and benches that once surrounded it suggest a memorial that gives equitable tribute to all the brave people who died.

The firefighters, policemen and emergency technicians were courageous, but they were not alone. My colleague Jose Marrero helped another colleague to a floor in the 20's, then climbed back up to assist others and died. The bond salesman who helped save Lauren -- and who survived -- was one of the first rescuers on the scene.

We can never know the full heroism of those trapped in the towers, but we can extrapolate from the actions of the survivors of 2001 and the 1993 bombing. The 9/11 rescue workers ran into danger, and that distinguishes their sacrifice. But the memorial can't leave unremarked the fortitude of people whose character can be known only through the remembered courage of their lives.

The old plaza suggests a way to honor them all: low, concentric walls, the outer walls permitting access to the inner ones, with each circle a step higher, to remind us of the burial mound. The polished granite top of the outermost ring could be engraved with the names of all who died at the World Trade Center -- workers, airline passengers and crew, uniformed rescue personnel -- listed alphabetically. The next ring would carry the names of the rescue workers, listed by unit.

The innermost circle would form a ring with an inscription: "To the Courage of the Heroes, Known and Unknown, of Sept. 11, 2001." At the center, the restored fountain, anchored again by the sphere would draw our eyes to the rebuilt towers and their rooftop gardens.

Let us have the courage to rebuild the World Trade Center, remembering that the real story of Sept. 11 is about climbing and looking to the sky.

Greg Manning is the author of "Love, Greg & Lauren: A Powerful True Story of Courage, Hope and Survival."