

WTC Design Competition Results

On December 18, 2002, citizens and designers of the United States and the world got a glimpse of some new ideas on how the site of New York's [World Trade Center](#) could be transformed over the coming decade. On December 18, 2002, the [Lower Manhattan Development Corporation](#) released a new set of design proposals submitted by some of the world's most talented architects. Perhaps skittish after the poor reception given the last round of proposals, the LMDC simultaneously also launched a [campaign to solicit public comment](#). At the public unveiling, Governor George Pataki said: "The plans are a bold declaration of New York's confidence and of Lower Manhattan's ability to emerge from the tragedy even stronger and better than it was before." Added Mayor Michael Bloomberg: "The plans presented today are imaginative, innovative, and go far beyond anything we have seen to date with regard to the 16 acres [6.5 hectares] of the World Trade Center site."

Responses from Seven Teams

At first glance, the nine schemes from seven teams certainly look more diverse than those presented last summer. [Foster and Partners](#), for instance, proposes to reassemble the iconic skyline, "to celebrate New York's positive spirit with a unique twinned tower — the most secure, the greenest, and the tallest in the world. The crystalline tower is based on triangular geometries —cross-cultural symbols of harmony, wisdom, purity, unity and strength." Foster's two towers come together at three points, creating observation platforms, exhibits, cafes, and other amenities. These links, which also appear in other schemes, have a safety benefit, as escape routes from one tower to the other. Foster's design features a multilayered facade enabling the towers to avoid energy-wasting air conditioning for up to 80 percent of the year.

The design by [Peterson Littenberg Architects](#) depicts a new city district with a public garden shaped by the former towers' footprints. Within the garden are memorials, amphitheater, and museum. Circling out from the garden are streets, squares, towers, and parks that together form an urbane public realm, intended to both heal the city and reach out to enhance the broader civic structure of Lower Manhattan.

The proposal made jointly by architects [Richard Meier](#), [Peter Eisenman](#), [Charles Gwathmey](#), and [Steven Holl](#) features a large public space in the tradition of Rockefeller Center and Union Square. Their "Memorial Square" is defined on two sides by tall buildings intending to restore the Manhattan skyline with "geometric clarity." The two buildings comprise five vertical sections with connecting horizontal floors. The cantilevered ends extend outward, nearly touching at the site's northeast corner, resembling "the interlaced fingers of protective hands."

A fourth team, called "United Architects," is made up of the firms [Reiser+Umemoto](#), Foreign Office Architects, [Greg Lynn FORM](#), Imaginary Forces, Kevin Kennon Architect, and [UN Studio](#). They propose a connected series of five buildings that creates a "cathedral-like enclosure" across the site, surrounding a large public plaza and park. Memorial visitors descend 75 feet (23 meters) below ground along a spiral walkway then look upward in remembrance. United Architects' single building is intended to be built in five phases. They say, "It will not only be the tallest building in the world, it will also be one of the safest. Each of the sloping towers contains multiple independent stairways, connected every 30 floors by areas of refuge."

One of the teams, "THINK," submitted three proposals because of uncertainties about eventual funding levels. The team includes Shigeru Ban, Frederic Schwartz, Ken Smith, [Rafael Vinoly](#), [Arup](#), [Buro Happold Engineers](#), Jorg Schlaich, William Moorish, David Rockwell, and Janet Marie Smith. The first of these three proposals is for a "Sky Park," a ten-block, ten-story-high, 16-acre rooftop public park that floats above the New York City street grid, with views of the Hudson River and the New York Harbor. Think's second idea is a "Great Room," a vast, covered public plaza connecting all the elements of the program under an enormous free-span glass ceiling. Using the large area of the roof and the space it covers, sustainable systems conserve energy and collect rainwater. A third alternative involves "Towers of Culture," two open latticework structures built above and around the footprints of the World Trade Center towers. The structures will be development sites for future cultural buildings.

[Studio Daniel Libeskind](#) created two large commemorative public places, which he calls the "Park of Heroes" and the "Wedge of Light." The structures are designed to not cast shadows on September 11th between the hours of 8:46 a.m., when the first airplane hit and 10:28 a.m., when the second tower collapsed. At the ground level are connections between retail, cultural, and transportation systems, while "the sky will be home again to a towering spire... A skyscraper rises above its predecessors, reasserting the preeminence of freedom and beauty, restoring the spiritual peak to the city, creating an icon that speaks of our vitality in the face of danger and our optimism in the aftermath of tragedy."

The final team was headed by [Skidmore, Owings and Merrill](#), with architects Field Operations, Tom Leader, Michael Maltzan, Neutelings Riedijk, and SANAA and with artists Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, Rita McBride, Jessica Stockholder, and Elyn Zimmerman. Their proposal consists of vertical structures organized into horizontal strata, including cultural space and green space. Unprecedented in a building of this size, it is planned to be self-reliant for water and a net contributor of electrical power to the city. At the top stratum, a horizontal plateau elevated above the skyline provides a public space for contemplation and observation.

Reacting to the Designs

[New York New Visions](#) (NYNV), a coalition of 21 architecture, engineering and planning organizations that has been advising the LMDC, believes that the proposals should be evaluated by comprehensive analysis of underlying function and feasibility, rather than a superficial focus on facade and form.

"This is not a competition in which someone chooses a plan that will automatically be built as proposed," cautioned Mark Ginsberg AIA, co-chair of NYNV. "However, these bold designs each contain innovative ideas — as a group, they educate us about site development opportunities and constraints." The NYNV Task Force will evaluate the nine schemes over the next few weeks and present their results to the LMDC.

How will this collection of avant-garde proposals from ambitious, style-conscious designers measure up to an urban mega-project? One wonders about scaling issues in dimensions both of space and time. How great is the risk of a terrible white elephant if trendy ideas of current architectural fashion are used to build a 100-year project? If these designers set aside current fashion to design something with more staying power, will they turn out to be equally fluent in that more sober language?

The schemes need to be evaluated thoroughly, calmly, and accurately. Unfortunately, despite the tremendous public interest in the new schemes, and the call for public comment notwithstanding, LMDC has announced that their "goal is to have a final land use plan in place by February."

Such aggressive timing highlights questions about where that "final land use plan" is coming from, and how much it would really be influenced by either the competition schemes or public input. It is not clear that the WTC reconstruction process has yet risen above the kind of mysterious backroom New York development politics that characterized the [original World Trade Center planning process](#).