

Fear must not become a form-giver for architecture

Practice Matters

By Charles Linn, FAIA

The terrorists were remarkably effective in what they did—it goes without saying that the events of September 11 have changed all of our lives forever. In recent months, most of us have been living with more anxiety than we are accustomed to. Our hyperactive news media keeps us on the alert for a new race of super villains capable of harming us with everything from home-brew bacteria to tennis-shoe bombs. The greatest power of these foes is their ability to defy description. No one knows who they are, where they will strike, what weapons they will use, when they will do it, or why.

As a consequence, the work architects and engineers are asked to do to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public has taken on new dimensions. Security and threat assessments are a growth industry for us. Those who take on this work are expected to determine if buildings are safe, and if not, to show how they can be made so. But isn't the subtext really, "How can the people who use this building be made to feel safe? Can you help us feel we are in control of what cannot be controlled?"

On the face of it, this seems out of the architect's purview. The psychological fortification of people against the unknown and unseen has always been the province of others: theologians, who traditionally counsel believers to have more faith; and mental health professionals, who may prescribe therapy, drugs, or both. We never thought

this task would fall to us, but now it has. Now we must learn to show our clients how to deal with the unknown, and to do it as responsibly as anything else we do. And we will.

Our own trauma

The process of learning to assuage the fears of our constituency will require that we come to grips with the profession-specific trauma many of us have experienced as a result of that horrifying day. The collapse of the World Trade Center violated every principle of physics and engineering that we have placed our faith in for our entire professional lives, and it happened right in front of us.

We may have disliked the design of the buildings, thought they were an insult to the skyline, or hated them because they seemed to embody the arrogant soul of capitalistic greed. But, no matter what we thought of them, they were, unquestionably, a technical triumph. They were a symbol of what we are capable of doing when we are at our most determined and inventive. They were resistant to all of the forces we could conceive. While it seems uncertain exactly which American ideals the terrorists were trying to obliterate when they attacked, they certainly could not have done anything to wound the confidence of architects and engineers more completely than to bring about the destruction of the twin towers. This kind of failure is unknown to us—the training architects and engineers receive and the

codes that guide us are so thorough and so good that only a handful of us will ever have a building we designed destroyed by a fire or structural failure. Nothing in our training prepares us for the feelings of grief and helplessness that doctors experience when, despite their most intelligent and heroic efforts, a patient is lost.

Now, when people ask, "Can it be made safe?" we can no longer punch numbers into a calculator or pick up a copy of the life-safety code, and say, "Yes, it is safe because it says so here." Instead, we have all been reminded in the most devastating way possible what we have always known: The qualities that make people feel safe when they occupy the environments we design are not to be found within equations or codes.

The greatest danger

We already have much experience designing some of the safest, most secure buildings possible. They aren't embassies or airports, but gated communities that combine studio apartments with on-site dining, recreation, and health-care facilities. Most people don't live in them willingly, however—to get into prison you have to be convicted of a crime.

Obviously, people do not envision that, when they ask us to create a place that is safe, we will give them a jail. Still, the greatest danger our profession faces now is that in solving the security problems set before us, we will

overcompensate, either because we are still being affected by what we saw on September 11 or because our clients believe they are in much more danger than they really are.

Yes, it is absolutely necessary that we create infrastructure that protects people and property where threat is high; for example, at airports, schools, courthouses, and embassies. But those places are the exception, not the rule. It will be a mistake our profession will long regret if we incarcerate those who have given us their trust inside oppressive architecture.

The greatest service we can offer our clients is to remind them that living rich and rewarding lives means accepting reasonable amounts of risk—architecture cannot be kept open and alive without it. What our profession must do now is to calm people and to help them understand which risks can realistically be dealt with through architecture and which cannot.

In the late 1920s many delightful Modernist buildings were built in the Soviet Union. As Stalin ascended to power—and became more and more paranoid—this open style was repressed and replaced by plain, gray, fortified architecture. It reflected the dictator's unbridled terror—of his own people and the outside world.

We can't let fear do this to our architecture. ■

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