



The Enduring Power of the Old Urbanism

When the trade towers fell, New Yorkers shunned Times Square and gravitated to traditional urban places.

By Roberta Brandes Gratz
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When the World Trade Center towers fell and New Yorkers felt the need to come together--to share pain, seek comfort, feel connected--they didn't go to Times Square, the spontaneous gathering spot of earlier eras captured in so many iconic photographs. Instead they gravitated to traditional urban places: parks, brownstone stoops, sidewalks, the steps of public buildings, local coffee shops. Even though too much of New York has been turned over to mall culture, the city remains a world-class model of the old urbanism. That is the secret of its resilience, the reason for its endurance, and the heart of the spirit that had the world in awe after the WTC calamity.



With its chain stores, sterile office towers, and formula hotels, Times Square no longer represents the old urbanism. What once made the neighborhood appealing to New Yorkers and visitors is gone --that combination of large and small businesses, rehearsal studios, musical instrument stores, photographers, costume makers, and scenery designers that were part of the surrounding theater district. The remaining historic theaters--saved from demolition only a few years ago--are the only things left there that are truly New York, and even they need a scheduled event to bring people together. Indeed Times Square is no longer an authentic New York place, even if all the digitally dazzling lights and signage give the impression from a distance that it is.

Union Square Park, at 14th Street and Broadway, is where so many gathered after the disaster. Some came just to be with other people; others to express rage, display their patriotism, or protest the nation's emerging warlike posture. A statue of George Washington served as a shrine where candles, flowers, and photos could be left in memory of those lost. And yet 30 years ago Union Square Park was given up for lost and taken over by petty criminals. The surrounding area had fallen out of favor. Then in 1976 a farmers' market opened, drawing from small regional farms. The Greenmarket, as it's now called, was the vision of one man, Barry Benepe. Now an international model (and there are more than two dozen around the city), it was met with official skepticism and resistance when it opened.

The Greenmarket was the catalyst for neighborhood revival, bringing a cross section of people to mingle in old urban ways, attracting first-class restaurants thrilled to have easy access to fresh produce, and stimulating the upgrading of many buildings for residential and commercial use. The city government redesigned the park back to its pedestrian-friendly roots, and new businesses of all kinds opened in the surrounding district. Today the neighborhood encompasses a healthy mishmash of uses. An intricate multifaceted life exists here, where the varied components are interdependent in complex ways and not overly dependent on any one use. This is the kind of diversity that sustains urban districts. Nothing is static.

So in crisis New Yorkers didn't retreat in isolation behind gates and high fences. They sought each other's comfort and congregated in impromptu ways. The tight-knit fabric of a city makes this feel natural. This coming together is made easier because we live so close together: the density is critical. The street theater in and around Union Square Park even on an ordinary day reaffirms the strength of traditional cities.

Before September 11 hotel occupancy was already way down and the tourist economy was hurting. In the boom economy we had become dependent on visitors, but the city's real economy is showing resiliency. Hundreds of displaced offices are relocating into the easily convertible spaces found in cities. A hotel has been turned into business suites; apartments serve as offices. Space that emptied as the economy slowed is filling up--6.3 million square feet in only one month. Residents are making extra effort to support their neighborhood businesses (the ones that had not closed during the recent economic downturn, as so many chain stores have). Local restaurants are busy, whereas those catering to expense accounts and deep-pocketed visitors are less so. The streets of the theater district are filled with people. The subways--the city's lifeblood--are serving us as well as they did before the disaster.

Conceived in the 1950s and '60s, the World Trade Center was based on an erroneous view of how to strengthen cities. The twin towers were New York's ultimate Corbusian design. A vital predominantly electronics- and produce-based economic district was wiped out to make way for their creation. The WTC never became a real trade center, nor did it anchor a downtown revival. With their 10 million square feet, the towers depressed the Manhattan real estate market for 15 years, until city growth caught up with them. Government offices filled space there for years. The city gained no significant new revenue from this real estate--in fact, a \$100 million city tax abatement helped keep it afloat.

The debate about how to rebuild is currently in high gear. What architectural form emerges is an open question. It won't be seven buildings on top of a shopping mall designed to create the impossible: a public space on the second floor. Everything must start at street level. This debate should be followed carefully by all cities. Isolated "mixed-use" projects with interior plazas and second-story "public spaces" have been built across the country. They don't connect to their surroundings or reweave torn urban fabric damaged by decades of the kind of urban renewal that produced the twin towers. It should not take a calamity to bring these issues to the forefront.

Maybe this time Rockefeller Center--perhaps New York's best example of old urbanism--will be the model. A tightly knit concentration of 13 tall and short multifunctional buildings designed cohesively by almost as many architects, the center has a pedestrian street down the middle that is the focus of an extraordinary public place. Stores and restaurants face the street on the ground level. The elements that made Rockefeller Center a model of old urbanism can be applied on any scale on vast sites in other cities.

The truth is that the twin towers were the city's backdrop, not its heart. But their minimalist boxlike form dominated the skyline, overpowering the Empire State, Chrysler, and Woolworth buildings--the truly great New York skyscrapers. The true loss in this disaster is human. Even without the towers New York's skyline will again become its own best icon--one that celebrates the ingenuity, entrepreneurship, individuality, and urbanism that are the city's greatest assets.

Roberta Brandes Gratz is author of *Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown* (John Wiley).

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