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Triumph and Commemoration: Collective Imagination and the ‘Ground Zero Mosque’ Controversy

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[The World Trade Center] site has been and remains under pressure to embody both commemoration and rehabilitation . . . Beyond mere rehabilitation, moreover, is the more strident call for triumphalism, for an economic and patriotic display of national and local energy that can pass muster as embodying the spirit of America and, inevitably, of capitalist democracy itself.¹

Following the infamous terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, New Yorkers and Americans struggled to process the tragedy and move forward in meaningful ways. Well before the site was cleared of debris, citizens of the great metropolis took action, forming civic coalitions in order to voice their visions for the reconstruction of Ground Zero and Lower Manhattan. Civic engagement in the redevelopment project was unprecedented in both scale and vigor. “September 11 was an event,” wrote Michael Sorkin in his contemporary journal on the rebuilding process. “It happened to all of us, not to buildings or businesses or an area downtown . . . [it] included everyone, and it is the extraordinariness of this fact that must be acknowledged by what gets done at Ground Zero.”² Indeed, thousands of citizens—mobilized by the collective memory of the attacks and their desires to heal their city and themselves—participated in the active reimagining of the World Trade Center site and the surrounding community. Less than five months after the attacks, Sorkin observed that informal consensus—or, that which can be termed collective imagination—had already begun to determine what could and could not happen in the area, now fraught with new meaning and catholic investment.³

In December 2009, a project called the Cordoba House—which was later renamed the Park51 Community Center—was initiated under the banner of rehabilitating Lower Manhattan and creating an interfaith dialogue that celebrated tolerance and diversity. The Islamic community center was slated to house, among other things, childcare facilities, space for craft, culture, and language courses, a fitness center, prayer space, and a swimming pool.⁴ The facility, modeled on the nearby Jewish Community Center, fit with New Yorkers' 2002 articulated vision for the rebuilding of their community. It seemed to be, and was readily accepted as, a positive contribution to mending New York City, both emotionally and physically, as it was to occupy a vacant Burlington Coat Factory building that was damaged by a falling fuselage on 11 September). Five months later, the project was reintroduced to the public. Rebranded by the media as the "Ground Zero Mosque," public support for the Cordoba House quickly eroded. The project's organizers, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan, spent the summer of 2010 answering to critics and fending off wild accusations, such as that from Tea Party activist Mark Williams, who accused the Cordoba Initiative of building "a monument to the terror attacks."⁵ Presented in this new light, large swaths of the public viewed the project as antithetical to their hopes for the rebuilding of Ground Zero and Lower Manhattan. In light of their vitriolic response, it would be easy to attribute antagonism to the Cordoba project to the virulent strand of anti-Islamic sentiment that infected the United States after 9/11. However, this superficial analysis does not address the heart of the controversy, in which opposition was expressed in spatial terms. "Nobody," Matt Sledge wrote tellingly for the *Huffington Post*, "regardless of political leanings, would tolerate a *mosque* at ground zero."⁶ I argue that the Park51 Community Center, as the press represented it, violated the collective imagination surrounding how the space—incorporating the World Trade Center site and the contiguous area—should be used; I suggest that this violation is largely responsible for New Yorkers' rejection of the project. The community center, which the media referred to, without exception, as a "mosque" and almost always placed it as being "at" Ground Zero, defied—in this context—popular visions for commemoration and the physical embodiment of American triumph in Lower Manhattan's urban landscape. New Yorkers were willing to entertain any number of plans to help their community heal from the 9/11 attacks, but something billed as "a tribute to the terrorists behind the hijackings" was not one of them.⁷

Collective Imagination

Ideas of collective imagination have been a part, albeit a very marginal one, of socio-political analysis since 1983. In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson wrote about the "anomaly" of nationalism. He defined the nation as "an imagined political community" in which its constitution was in the collective imagining of a communion of members.⁸ In his 2004 publication, *How Societies are Born*, Jan Vansina adopted Anderson's concept and applied it to an analysis of premodern governance in West Central Africa. He described

collective imagination as “a set of representations of perceived realities and values that are accepted without question by most, perhaps even by all, members of a given community.”⁹ He continued, “Because it is collective, it focuses on objects of interest to all.”¹⁰ In Vansina’s view, intercommunication fed collective imagination. He wrote, “People think about events, dream, and sometimes have visions, which they communicate to others in conversations . . . when they think that these persons will be interested. These communications then often lead to speculation.”¹¹ Thus, intercommunication and popular interest are crucial to the activation of collective imagination. Sociologist Michael Ian Borer added one more important factor to this definition when he articulated the need for a shared past, in order for a community to conceive of a collective future. Borer wrote, “[C]ollective memory and collective imagination are on opposite sides of the temporal coin.”¹² He elaborated, “Whereas collective memory is generally understood as a selective reading of the past based on a public’s concerns in the present, collective imagination is a selective envisioning of the future based on a public’s concerns in the present *and* their interpretations of the past.”¹³ Hence, the catalysts for collective imagination include intercommunication, a common interest, and a shared past. I argue that it is within this framework that the reconstruction of Ground Zero and Lower Manhattan engaged collective imagination.

A look at sociological scholarship gives us some insight into the transformative effects of 9/11 on the New York community and the activation of the criteria for collective imagination. Arielle Goldberg explained, “On September 11, 2001, people around the world, most especially New Yorkers, shar[ing] a . . . loss . . . emerged from this experience with a renewed sense of shared fate and a strong desire to contribute to revitalizing and rebuilding lower Manhattan and New York City.”¹⁴ She argued that, after the attack, the towers took on new meaning for New Yorkers and that “with that emotional investment came a sense of public proprietorship.”¹⁵ Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low supported Goldberg’s statement, contending that “whole cultures often consensually or collectively share attachments to places,” and that “collective social attachments . . . are especially salient during times of relocation, upheaval, and . . . disasters.”¹⁶ The scale of the shared 9/11 tragedy created an unprecedented interest in redevelopment for the World Trade Center site and Lower Manhattan. Barbara B. Brown and Douglas B. Perkins wrote that disruptions in place attachment force communities to “negotiate a reconciliation between the past that has been lost and a future that is both desirable and meaningful.”¹⁷ When an urban location—such as the wounded downtown landscape post-9/11—is so identifiable that it becomes, what Borer calls, a “common referent,” it allows “for the possibility of dialogue between groups within and across neighborhoods and communities.”¹⁸ Grappling with the aftermath of the unprecedented disaster, New Yorkers immediately seized the opportunity for intercommunication. Studies in social science dating from 1920 to 1969 describe how communities coalesce after catastrophes into “cities of comrades,” “democracies of distress,” “communities of sufferers,” which Kai

Erikson recognized in the way that “masses of New Yorkers . . . came together in what looked like one vast communion, gather[ing] on street corners, [and] sharing views and information.”¹⁹ This communication, in the service of processing tragedy, quickly turned toward the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan and Ground Zero. Civic organizations and forums emerged, attracting tens of thousands of participants. “Many if not most appear to have attended not just because they hoped to make some difference in public policy,” wrote Erikson, “but because they wanted to be a part of the ‘public,’ to join ongoing conversations about the future of their community.”²⁰

Civic Engagement: Imagining the Future

While many critics argue that the civic groups that emerged after 9/11 had only marginal influence over building in Lower Manhattan, these forums still provided an opportunity for ideas to be articulated, circulated and absorbed into the collective mind.²¹ Sorkin wrote, “Loss always offers an opening, and the way we confront it goes to the heart of our ethical relationship to suffering and to the role of repair—of healing—in the process of moving on.”²² In confronting the loss, the author and architect, along with tens of thousands of his fellow citizens, chose to—in his words—“engage with the collectivity in reinventing the possibility of the prospective in the wake of events that made the future impossible to simply take for granted.”²³ Participants brought a vast array of ideas for Ground Zero and Lower Manhattan to this engagement, though organizers and community leaders were optimistic that a “common ground” or “consensus” could be achieved.²⁴ Indeed, what emerged from the forums was a consensus that commemoration and triumph were necessary narratives that should be writ large across the urban landscape of Lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center site. Sorkin identified the two responses as: “to build intensively as both symbol and substance of regeneration and as rejoinder to the terror and, on the other hand, to leave the site free of commercial building, a permanent memorial.”²⁵ Although seemingly mutually exclusive, David Simpson argues that, actually, the participatory process itself was a method by which to reconcile the two visions, “harmoniz[ing] the need for shelter and commemoration with the desire for display and political advantage.”²⁶ Deliberative processes, such as those hosted by New York City’s civic coalitions, have the capacity to collectivize ideas, insofar as they allow for a general consensus about a range of acceptable possibilities.²⁷ Indeed, Francesca Polletta and Lesley Wood conclude:

[D]eliberation makes it possible for people to scrutinize and modify their preexisting interests and develop new ones . . . the object is not necessarily full consensus. Rather, it is the parties’ recognition of the validity of a range of arguments, though not all arguments. Once that recognition occurs, people can accept a decision that does not match their preferences exactly.²⁸

It is through this process that the many ideas of New Yorkers were distilled into a few, echoing larger, collectivized visions for the future of the city. A look at two such deliberative forums, Imagine NY and Listening to the City, provide insight into collective projections of commemoration and triumph.

Imagine NY

In the winter following the attacks, the Municipal Art Society held three focus groups with community representatives from civic organizations, agencies and businesses. The groups identified the need for an “inclusive public involvement process that would not only focus on rebuilding the World Trade Center site and revitalizing Lower Manhattan, but would also address larger regional needs and the emotional recovery process.”²⁹ Between March and May of 2002, 230 Imagine New York workshops—held in English, Spanish, Cantonese, and American Sign Language—attracted more than 3,000 people with an additional 850 Internet and mail-in entries.³⁰ Imagine NY held forums throughout the tri-state region. While some venues were responsible for their own publicity, others benefited from an extensive media campaign and outreach effort. According to the Imagine NY *Summary Report*, a public service announcement ran “on several television stations and on the JumboTron in Times Square.”³¹ Race, age, and income distribution of participants closely mirrored regional figures, but individuals with higher levels of education were overrepresented. Thirty-five percent of participants had achieved post-graduate training, as opposed to thirteen percent of the region’s residents.³² Facilitators prompted residents, “Imagine yourself, your home, your neighborhood, and your workplace 5 to 10 years from now . . . Thinking about the World Trade Center site, your community, and the New York region as a whole, what should be done to move forward from September 11th?”³³ Nineteen-thousand ideas were collected and, at the 1 June summit, 300 volunteers sifted through the ideas to identify “common themes and visions,” which were distilled into the 49 visions—expressed in the words of Imagine NY participants—presented in the Steering Committee’s report.³⁴

In the visions collected by Imagine NY, the importance of manifesting commemoration and triumph emerged. A large number of New Yorkers stood behind ideas to “establish days of remembrance and commemorative events,” “honor 9/11 victims through public projects and naming” and “remember and honor the victims of September 11 on the WTC site.”³⁵ They communicated a desire to “respect the WTC site as hallowed ground,” mandating that, at the very least, the footprints of the Twin Towers should be free of commercial development.³⁶ Similarly, participants called for “a memorial monument on the WTC site: a lasting, magnificent, non-denominational monument . . . that physically evokes the scale and scope of the tragedy.”³⁷ Moreover, they called for a restoration of the skyline, explaining, “Whatever is built at the site must be a prominent, soaring symbol of life and must be visionary and forward looking . . . to restore and to re-imagine our skyline, and to create a new visual and spiritual beacon

for New York.”³⁸ In a similar call for a projection of resilience and strength, participants argued that “the Twin Towers should be built as they were before September 11th, perhaps even taller, to restore our spirit and dignity, and to prove that the terrorists did not prevail.”³⁹

The forum also served to define that which Erikson calls “the geographical dimensions of 9/11.”⁴⁰ Ground Zero, so embedded in the identity of Lower Manhattan, was to be inextricably linked to the neighborhood. The aura of the site—a burial ground for almost 3,000 lives—extended well beyond the 16 acres bounded by the streets marking its perimeter. “The question isn’t simply how close normal life should be permitted to come but what activities are considered respectful,” wrote Sorkin. “It should be clear that some things cannot come too close to Ground Zero, wherever we decide to locate it.”⁴¹ New Yorkers adamantly insisted on being part of this process. Thirty-two of the 49 visions collected from Imagine NY participants dealt with city or regional planning issues, beyond the limits—strictly speaking—of the World Trade Center site. Citizens were deeply invested in the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan, and civic engagement remained strong throughout the months following Imagine NY, culminating in another such series of forums titled, “Listening to the City.”

Listening to the City

Listening to the City was a project created by the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, a collective of over 85 civic, business, environmental, community, university and labor groups that sought to create consensus surrounding the downtown area’s redevelopment.⁴² According to the Civic Alliance’s *Report on Proceedings*, Listening to the City meetings were “designed to give people a voice in rebuilding the World Trade Center site, New York City and the region,” boasting that “people strove to make a virtue of their differences by joining together to describe their visions for the future and to help each other recover from a shattering attack.”⁴³ During the 20 to 22 July sessions, more than 4,500 people convened at the Jacob Javits Convention Center, and more than 800 additional people participated in the online dialogue that took place over the following two weeks.⁴⁴ The gender and age compositions of participants mirrored that of the general population. According to the report, “Services available to participants . . . included sign language and simultaneous spoken translation; facilitators who spoke Spanish and Chinese; foreign-language, Braille and large-print copies of important discussion materials . . . and grief counselors.”⁴⁵ Participants at the Jacob Javits Center met in 10- to 12-person groups, each led by a trained facilitator. They transmitted ideas via laptop computers to a “theme team,” who “identified the strongest concepts from the discussions and . . . developed a set of priorities and questions that were posed on large screens throughout the meeting hall.”⁴⁶ Participants voted on these questions using wireless polling keypads. Online dialogues operated similarly; project leaders sifted through over

10,000 messages, culling out important themes. Thirty-two polls based on those themes were then put to a vote.⁴⁷

Results from the Civic Alliance's Listening to the City polls support the idea of a collective call for triumph and commemoration. One poll, which instructed voters to choose the "most important" hope for the rebuilding process, allotted 72 percent of the vote to visions that called for filling "the void in the sky . . . like a phoenix rising out of the ashes" and creating something "world-class . . . making history."⁴⁸ Seventy-one percent of respondents thought that adding "a major element or icon to the Lower Manhattan skyline" was "very important"; combined with those who found the proposal "important" or "somewhat important," advocates for a triumphant reclamation of the skyline reached 89 percent.⁴⁹ When asked if "a new tower or towers [should] be built to replace the 110-story World Trade Center towers," 40 percent of voters wanted to rebuild even taller towers, 20 percent wanted to rebuild towers of the same height, eight percent wanted the towers replaced at a slightly less dizzying height, and another 26 percent advocated the building of something "grand and inspiring" in their place.⁵⁰ In total, 94 percent of respondents called for a grand symbol of rehabilitation in the wake of terror. The fact that 90 percent of voters responded that it was at least "somewhat important" to link the memorial plans to the design of the rest of the World Trade Center site indicates New Yorkers' prioritization of a Ground Zero memorial; in fact, the majority of participants, 64 percent, determined the foregrounding of the memorial in redevelopment to be "very important."⁵¹

Also significant is the fact that Listening to the City attendees roundly rejected plans that violated visions of triumph and commemoration. John Whitehead of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and Joseph Seymour of the Port Authority presented six nearly identical proposals for Ground Zero that featured a stand of squat buildings and a nominal nod to memorialization, generally articulated in the form of a small garden or plaza. Philip Nobel wrote in *Sixteen Acres* that the three proposals that obliterated the hallowed footprints of the Twin Towers—newly sanctified in the public imagination—"were dead on arrival."⁵² Listening to the City's *Report of Proceedings* recorded that the audience felt that the plans "did not provide an appropriate setting for a memorial" and that "a consensus was quickly reached that all the proposals were fundamentally inadequate . . . Missing from the concepts, they said, was any sense that something enduring would rise from the ashes of ground zero to help define Lower Manhattan the way the Twin Towers once did."⁵³ Reactions were consistent with that of the general public. Nobel wrote that, within the pages of the *New York Times*—which featured images of the six plans on the front page—"were the beginnings of what would be three weeks of public opinion-whipping excoriation."⁵⁴ The plans were scrapped and a new call for proposals was released. The catastrophe served as a critical example of the backlash produced when collective imagination—regarding Ground Zero, steeped in signification and emotional investment—was violated.

Civic forums, such as *Imagine NY* and *Listening to the City*, represented collective visions for the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center site, but they were also integral—through the processes of deliberation and communication—to harmonizing otherwise-dissonant ideas into a broad, collective conception about what should, and should not, be done in the name of healing. Sorkin sympathetically wrote in 2001 about the “clamor for rebuilding,” arguing that “this was a preeminent icon of the town and we don’t want to give terror the symbolic victory of disfiguring our legendary skyline.”⁵⁵ The impulse to reconstruct the towers, or some equally impressive embodiment of triumph, was widespread, capturing the imaginations of Michael Sorkin and a broad consensus of his fellow New Yorkers. It was also an entirely reasonable impulse. Setha M. Low wrote that, when symbols of the landscape are threatened, “such as occurred following the World Trade Center disaster, children and adults attempt to reconfigure their sense of landscape. This included a desire to return the site to its original form or the process of recreating the site in their imaginations.”⁵⁶

What they created—what they articulated in forums by the tens of thousands—was an expression of triumph and commemoration. What had also been determined were the limits of Ground Zero; what Sorkin called “the sacrality of the site—its aura and dimensions.”⁵⁷ It was not just development on the World Trade Center site that would be subject to rigorous scrutiny. Future development of the contiguous spaces of Lower Manhattan, pulled into the orbit of hallowed ground, would likewise be subject to the strictures of collective imagination. When “*Listening to the City*” participants, and the public at large, rejected out-of-hand the half-dozen disdainfully lackluster proposals for the World Trade Center site, a precedent was set. Future proposals for area redevelopment would have to conform to collective visions of triumph and commemoration, thoughtlessly violated by the six designs, or face the same vitriol. The incident was a precursor to the controversy that would erupt years later over what was to be dubbed the “Ground Zero Mosque.”

The “Ground Zero Mosque” Controversy

The press on the Park51 Project, preliminarily titled *Cordoba House*, began innocently enough. In December 2009, the media articulated the project’s role as a positive contribution to the healing and redevelopment of Lower Manhattan. The narrative was one in which the American ideals of tolerance and diversity were to win out over radical Islam. On the ninth of December, a *New York Times* article, entitled “Muslim Prayers and Renewal near Ground Zero,” quoted a number of community leaders in support of the initiative. “We as New York Muslims have as much of a commitment to rebuilding New York as anybody,” Fatima Shama, the mayor’s director of the Office of Immigrant Affairs, stated.⁵⁸ “The idea of a cultural center that strengthens ties between Muslims and people of all faiths and backgrounds is positive,” said Lynn Rasic, a spokeswoman for the National September 11 Memorial and Museum.⁵⁹ The *Cordoba Initiative*, deemed

an “interfaith group” by the article, quoted the chairman and CEO of Soho Properties, who lauded the project as “a place of peace, a place of services and solutions for the community which is always looking for interfaith dialogue.”⁶⁰ Joy Levitt of the Jewish Community Center was recorded as remarking that “for the J.C.C. to have partners in the Muslim community that share our vision of pluralism and tolerance would be great.”⁶¹ It was, moreover, mentioned that Daisy Khan, wife of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, leader of the Cordoba Initiative, was concurrently serving on the advisory team for the 9/11 memorial. In an interview with Kahn on the *O’Reilly Factor* twelve days later, guest host Laura Ingraham commented, “I can’t find many people who really have a problem with [the Cordoba project] . . . I like what you’re trying to do.”⁶² According to *Salon.com* journalist Justin Elliott, who retrospectively diagrammed the controversy for readers, the *New York Times* article and the *O’Reilly* interview created nary a ripple in the media pond. He wrote that a search of the Nexis newspaper archive revealed a five and a half month gap in news articles on the project after its initial press.⁶³

Following a period of silence on the Park51 project, news of the nominal approval of Manhattan’s Community Board 1—twenty-nine to one, with ten abstentions—provided the catalyst for the reframing of the initiative. On 6 March 2010, *Associated Press* writer Cristian Salazar released the headline, “Building Damaged in 9/11 to be Mosque for NYC Muslims.”⁶⁴ Salazar’s article begins, “In a building damaged by debris from the Sept. 11 airliners that brought down the World Trade Center and soon to become a 13-story mosque, some see the bridging of a cultural divide and an opportunity to serve a burgeoning, peaceful religious population. Others see a painful reminder of the religious extremism that killed their loved ones.”⁶⁵ The article is somewhat even-handed, aside from the use of vitriolic quotes, such as, “I think it’s despicable, and I think it’s atrocious that anyone would even consider allowing them to build a mosque near the World Trade Center.”⁶⁶ Right-wing blogger Pamela Gellar and *New York Post* writer Andrea Peyser took up the thread with vigor. Gellar titled her 6 March blog post, “Monster Mosque Pushes Ahead in Shadow of World Trade Center Islamic Death and Destruction.”⁶⁷ The next day, she rallied readers to “Stop the 911 Mosque!” She promoted a protest of the project in the following terms: “SIOA (Stop Islamization of America) and our New York leader, Pamela Hall, are organizing a coalition and action plan to fight the grotesque plans to build a monster mosque on the hallowed ground of the worst attack on American soil in US history.”⁶⁸ Neither post was complimentary. Peyser’s article for the *Post* followed on 13 May. The article stated, “A mosque rises over Ground Zero. And fed-up New Yorkers are crying, ‘No!’ A chorus of critics—from neighbors to those who lost loved ones on 9/11 to me—feel as if they’ve received a swift kick in the teeth.”⁶⁹ The symbol of Park51 as a “place of peace” and partner in promoting “pluralism and tolerance” was being dismantled. The image of Daisy Khan seeking to help a community heal from 9/11 was being cast aside for a more sensational persona of

a woman antagonistically foisting her “monster mosque” on a wounded public. According to Peyser, amidst all the “outrage” over the Cordoba project, “Khan insist[ed] it’s staying put.”⁷⁰ The article ended with three words regarding what Peyser called “the Ground Zero mosque”: “Move it away.”⁷¹

“Mosque Madness” rolled on throughout the summer. The season saw conservative politicians take aim. Elliot recorded that “Rudy Giuliani had called the mosque a ‘desecration,’ . . . Sarah Palin had tweeted her famous ‘peaceful Muslims, pls refudiate’ tweet . . . [and] Peter King and Newt Gingrich and Tim Pawlenty followed suit.”⁷² Journalists and bloggers, despite their position on the Park51 Community Center, were dooming it in the court of public opinion simply by designating the project misleadingly the “Ground Zero Mosque” in their headlines. A 7 June article in the *Christian Post* titled “Thousands Rally Against Ground Zero ‘Mega Mosque’” reported on Geller’s SIOA protest of the community center. The article summarized the opposition to the project when it stated, “Opponents of the Muslim-led project . . . say building an Islamic center so close to Ground Zero would be demeaning and offensive to the 2,976 victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Some even say the construction of the Cordoba House would mark a victory for those who sought and still seek to terrorize the American people.”⁷³ This reduction of the argument manages despite itself to provide insight into psychology of the opposition. What had impressed people on a very fundamental level was that the “Ground Zero Mosque” represented a departure—indeed an about face—from the commemoration and triumph they had envisioned for the healing of Lower Manhattan. As some had come to understand the project, it would not only fail to honor the dead, it would callously disrespect them. Further, the triumph it represented was of the wrong variety entirely: that of the radical Islamists who had felled the Twin Towers. In early August, Mayor Michael Bloomberg attempted to again reframe the debate, fitting the construction of the community center back into a narrative of American ideological triumph and commemoration. *New York Times* writers Michael Barbaro and Javier C. Hernandez reported, “With the Statue of Liberty as his backdrop, the mayor pleaded with New Yorkers to reject suspicions about the planned 13-story complex . . . saying that ‘we would betray our values if we were to treat Muslims differently than anyone else. To cave to popular sentiment would be to hand a victory to the terrorists—and we should not stand for that.’”⁷⁴

Despite Mayor Bloomberg’s overtures, it seemed that popular opinion against the “Ground Zero Mosque” was still fairly entrenched in the great metropolis. A series of polls in August and September revealed the state of public opinion. The results of a phone survey of 622 New York state residents conducted between 27 to 29 July and 2 to 3 August by the Siena College Research Institute were reported under the headline, “Poll: 3 in 5 New Yorkers Oppose Ground Zero Mosque.”⁷⁵ Ethan Cole’s article for the *Christian Post* cited SRI director Don Levy when it stated, “Large majorities of all New Yorkers, every party, region and age give a thumbs-down to the Cordoba House Mosque being built near the Ground Zero

site.”⁷⁶ A study by Quinnipiac University—in which data was collected through 751 live interviews between the 16 September and 20 September—yielded similar results. It held that while New York state likely voters determined 80 to 15 percent that “a Muslim group has the right to build a mosque near Ground Zero,” they advocated 67 to 21 percent for supporters of the project to voluntarily relocate the center elsewhere.⁷⁷ Interestingly, the study showed a significant split in sentiment along political lines. It revealed, “Democrats say 50–34 percent that a mosque near Ground Zero is appropriate, while Republicans say 90–8 percent and independent voters say 63–30 percent that it’s wrong. Calls to move the mosque voluntarily range from 95–4 percent among Republicans to 72–22 percent among independent voters to 49–29 percent among Democrats.”⁷⁸

While a number of inferences could be drawn from such data, what is perhaps most apparent is the effect of the press on public opinion of the Park51 Community Center. The intensity of the negative framing of the project in the conservative media and by conservative politicians came to bear incongruously on New Yorkers—with similarly right-wing leanings—who were repeatedly exposed to the profligate slander and libel. On 25 August 2010, conservative radio personality Laura Ingram, once again guest hosting Fox’s *O’Reilly Factor*, belligerently demanded a presidential intervention to halt construction of the “mosque.” Eight months after publicly giving her blessing to Daisy Khan and the Cordoba Initiative, the intervening months and the concomitant reframing of the project prompted Ingraham to exclaim, “Why is Barack Obama letting this go on? Why is the president of the United States . . . letting this continue as it is?”⁷⁹ In his book on commemorating 9/11, Simpson wrote that “there was never a point at which . . . response [to 11 September] could be analyzed as prior to or outside of its mediation by television and by political manipulation.”⁸⁰ Response to the Park51 project should be understood similarly. Samantha Gross of the *Associated Press* wrote nearly ten years after the terrorist attacks that “the mosque furor has brought 9/11 back to the fore of America’s consciousness. It had been quiet for a long time, bogged down in the bureaucracy of what would be built, for how much and when. Amid all the disputes and all the compromise, the World Trade Center site had lost some of its hold on the public’s imagination.”⁸¹ The condemnatory press coverage of the Park51 Community Center reactivated that imagination, reminding New Yorkers what they wanted for Ground Zero and ensuring, by framing the project as a violation of triumph and commemoration, that they would find the initiative wanting.

Conclusion

A *Fair.org* article by Steve Randall and Alex Kane articulated common assumptions when they attributed the opposition to Park51 to “Islamaphobia and a media culture that is often receptive to it”; but the analysis falls short.⁸² Most significantly, charges of Islamaphobia fail to account for New Yorkers’ reaction to the opening of the Park51 Community Center. That is, no reaction at all.

Three articles, dated 22 September 2011, reported on the deafening silence of the opposition on opening night. Zaid Jilani wrote for *Think Progress*, “Despite all the heated rhetoric from opponents of Park51 in the recent past, the cultural and community center opened its doors in lower Manhattan yesterday with an official ribbon cutting ceremony that faced no protests or public controversy.”⁸³ Mark Jacobson echoed the sentiment, writing, “Last year, Park51 . . . was the flashpoint of the most heated New York City public debate in decades . . . on Wednesday night, however . . . Park51’s recent history was little in evidence.”⁸⁴ New Yorkers’ opposition to the community center had vanished as quickly as it had appeared. In like a lion, out like a lamb, their resistance had been fleeting, faddish; hatred is intractable. Whereas charges of Islamophobia fail to provide a satisfactory understanding of New Yorkers’ opposition—and reconciliation—to the Park51 project, an analysis based on collective imagination accommodates the otherwise-inexplicable shift in public opinion. When participants of civic forums showed up in droves to communicate their visions for commemoration and triumph they also articulated a number of more mundane goals for the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan. Plans for cultural and community centers received strong support. Seventy-four percent of “Listening to the City” participants believed it was at least “somewhat important” to “establish cultural centers” as part of the revitalization effort.⁸⁵ Likewise, visions collected from “Imagine NY” forums included the following:

Build community unity and solidarity . . . among people of various backgrounds, ages and ethnicities. The physical redevelopment of the region should add more gathering places, sanctuaries, community centers and services that provide opportunities for volunteerism, youth programs, and inter-group dialogue.⁸⁶

Promote multiculturalism and tolerance on the WTC site . . . us[ing it] to build understanding between people of different ethnicities, cultures and religions worldwide . . . through such activities as education, dialogue and volunteerism.⁸⁷

Within this framework, the Park51 Community Center clearly conformed to collective visions for the rehabilitation of Ground Zero and Lower Manhattan. However, in the summer of 2010, it had not been presented to the public as such.

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment of clarity in which New Yorkers recognized that the “Ground Zero Mosque” was not a violation of their vision for the city’s recovery, but the manifestation of their own collective imagination. Perhaps Bloomberg’s speech had not completely fallen on deaf ears. Perhaps as the media coverage and incendiary rhetoric died down, citizens were able to divorce the reality of Park51 from the negative-sell campaign and rampant flow of disinformation and misrepresentation that had come to define it. Either way, evidence of the impending enlightenment cropped up in the Siena College

Research Institute poll reported by Ethan Cole in the *Christian Post*. The August 2010 article asserted that “more than half of NYC residents agree that the project would promote tolerance or, at least, are willing to listen to the idea.”⁸⁸ To their credit, Randall and Kane had certainly gotten it right when they pointed a condemnatory finger at media culture for creating opposition to the community center. Park51 had always conformed to the collective imagination of the New York City citizenry, it was only through the distortion of the media lens that the project was repackaged and sold—deliberately or incidentally—as a violation of the public’s collective vision for their city’s recovery from 11 September. In his essay, “What Buildings Do,” Thomas F. Gieryn wrote that buildings “are forever objects of (re) interpretation, narration and representation—and meanings or stories are sometimes more pliable than the walls and floors they depict. We deconstruct buildings materially and semiotically, all the time.”⁸⁹ When Park51 ceased to be defined as a “community center”—a place for inter-faith dialogue, tolerance and community growth—and became the “Ground Zero Mosque,” the tide of public reception changed with the moniker.

11 September 2001 was imbedded in the collective memory of the city, and its significance therein defined the limits of what New Yorkers would and would not accept in the redevelopment of Ground Zero and the adjacent space of Lower Manhattan. In the rehabilitative visions expressed by tens of thousands of New Yorkers in an unprecedented series of deliberative forums, commemoration and embodiments of American triumph loomed large in the collective imagination. Nearly a decade hence, a summer 2010 protest of the Park51 Community Center—maligned in the media as the ‘Ground Zero Mosque’—demonstrated just how wedded the public was to those imagined narratives. The *New York Times* reported,

[One protestor] said many families who lost loved ones at the site were “incensed” about the mosque, viewing it as a tribute to the terrorists behind the hijackings . . . “High up in the air you have a 13-story mosque, outshining the memorial itself,” Mr. Doyle said. “It’s almost a slap in the face” . . . One woman carried a sign reading, “Don’t Glorify Murders of 3,000; No 9/11 Victory Mosque.”⁹⁰

Understood as a monument to the “victory” of Islamic Extremists which marginalized—or worse, subverted—memorialization, it was clear that the “mosque” had violated collective imagination in a very fundamental way. As the summer of discontent turned to autumn, the media firestorm passed and slowly but surely opposition to the Park51 project went with it.

Journalist Matt Sledge’s keen assessment, amidst the 2010 controversy over the project, that nobody would tolerate a mosque at Ground Zero seems valid by all accounts. Indeed, collective imagination would not accept a “mosque” at Ground Zero. But it would, and did, accept the Park51 “community center.”

NOTES

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¹² Michael Ian Borer, "From Collective Memory to Collective Imagination: Time, Place, and Urban Redevelopment," *Symbolic Interaction* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2010):108.

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¹⁴ Arielle Goldberg, "Civic Engagement in the Rebuilding of the World Trade Center," in *Contentious City: The Politics of Recovery in New York City*, ed. John Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 112.

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¹⁸ Borer, "From Collective Memory to Collective Imagination," 105.

¹⁹ Kai Erikson, "Epilogue: The Geography of Disaster," in *Wounded City: The Social Impact of 9/11*, ed. Nancy Foner (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 356.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Sorkin, *Starting from Zero*, 12; Goldberger, *Up From Zero*, 252.

²² Sorkin, *Starting From Zero*, 11.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Francesca Polletta and Lesley Wood, "Public Deliberations After 9/11," in *Wounded City: The Social Impact of 9/11*, ed. Nancy Foner (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005), 321.

²⁵ Sorkin, *Starting From Zero*, 7.

²⁶ Simpson, *9/11*, 15.

²⁷ Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, "Directly Deliberative Polyarchy," *European Law Journal* 3 (1997):313–342; Ian Shapiro, "Optimal Deliberation?" *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002):196–211.

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- ³⁰ Ibid., 1–2.
- ³¹ Ibid., 6.
- ³² Ibid., 7.
- ³³ Ibid., 3–4.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 2.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 8.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 9.
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- ⁴⁸ Listening to the City, *Online Dialogues—Poll Results*, March 25, 2012, <http://www.listeningtothecity.org/online/polls.html>.
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- ⁵⁵ Sorkin, *Starting From Zero*, 21.
- ⁵⁶ Setha M. Low, “Lessons from Imagining the World Trade Center Site: An Examination of Public Space and Culture,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Sept. 2002):398.
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