by {ga=mhostetter}
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The 40-year-old Lincoln Center marriage is breaking up: City Opera is hoping to find a new home downtown and the Philharmonic is moving back to Carnegie Hall. And, after months of squabbling over budgets and plans, the chairman of what was to have been a $1.5 billion overhaul of the center's aging buildings has resigned.

Meanwhile, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation is seeking to fill a half-million square feet of space designated for culture at the World Trade Center site. In an open invitation, the agency declared that it is "in search of cultural institutions that will establish and maintain Lower Manhattan as a world class cultural destination full of vitality, energy and diversity." Interested parties are requested to submit preliminary proposals by September.

Just as Robert Moses dreamed up Lincoln Center to revitalize a run-down neighborhood, city and corporate interests believe that culture can be a magnet for development downtown. So, the time is right to ask: what's wrong with Lincoln Center? With the benefit of hindsight, what mistakes can the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation avoid in creating the next-generation cultural center?

Lesson #1: Don't Erect Pedestals

In the late 1950s, Lincoln Center was conceived as a temple to high art, proof that New York could compete with European cities as a cultural destination. It catalyzed the creation of arts complexes in capitals across the nation, helping to redefine the role of cities at a time when businesses and families were fleeing them in droves.

Today, Lincoln Center is trying to reinvent itself -- holding parties in its courtyard, reaching out to younger and more diverse audiences, trying to overcome an aura of elitism or, worse, dullness. As part of the center's more modest plans for renovation, stores, restaurants, and a series of sloping ramps will be created along 65th street to open up the campus.

Judging from architect Daniel Libeskind's plan to restore part of the grid and create parks and other public spaces, the new World Trade Center site will be built on a human, rather than monumental, scale. Yet, the shadow of history at Ground Zero -- sacred ground to many -- will place the cultural institutions built there on a different kind of pedestal. There will be a museum to explore the 1993 and 2001 bombings of the towers, and a memorial to the victims. But, will the art that is mounted at the theaters, galleries, or concert halls be required to match the moral seriousness of the tragedy? Will producers, even unconsciously, avoid politically controversial works out of fear of upsetting the families of the dead?

Lesson #2: Don't Be Afraid of Commercialism

Building Lincoln Center proved enormously expensive -- $159.5 million, more than four times original estimates. The Metropolitan Opera House cost $12,000 a seat, at a time when opera houses were being built elsewhere for a fraction. Once expectations had been raised, production costs skyrocketed: Don Quixote, the City Ballet's lavish tribute to its new home, cost more than any other ballet in history.

Originally, Lincoln Center was to have an office tower to generate rental revenue and defray maintenance expenses. The decision to eliminate the tower, and let the city operate the underground parking lot, deprived the center of important funds that could have made it less dependent on corporate and government largesse.

World Trade Center planners should remember that it is easier to raise money for new buildings than it is to pay for their upkeep. It's unlikely that future cultural groups will join the handful of institutions that have their utility costs picked up by the city, and few private funders will volunteer to pay for air-conditioning. Following a growing trend among nonprofits, the new cultural groups should seek to maximize earned income through ticket sales, investments, rentals, stores, and educational programs. They should also pool resources. To encourage collaboration, the city could offer joint purchasing options for common products and services.

Lesson #3: Listen to the Pros

Lincoln Center's architects had to answer to many constituencies, but in many cases they failed to please the Muses. The Avery Fisher Hall was resurfaced three times in its first seven years in hopes of improving muddy acoustics. The Vivian Beaumont Theater was built with huge backstage areas to accommodate multiple sets from shows playing in repertory -- an outmoded model even then, and one that saddled the theater with unnecessary expenses.

Planning for the World Trade Center site will appropriately involve many different parties, but it is crucial that arts professionals have a prominent place at the table. In the past, public officials have proved more adept at discussing the symbolic value of arts than attending to the practical needs of directors, musicians, actors, or museum workers. Perhaps the most important lesson from Lincoln Center is that, over time, cultural spaces will have to meet many different production and aesthetic demands. To prepare for this, veteran theater architect George Izenour calls for designs that are intrinsically adaptable, with walls that move, seats that disappear beneath the floor, and sound panels that can be tuned for the occasion.

Lesson #4: Don't Think Too Big

The producers at Lincoln Center have to fill huge spaces, including a 3,800-seat opera house, 2,900-seat concert hall, and 2,700-seat theater. To succeed, each organization has to cultivate its own constituency of diehard opera fans, ballet aficionados, or theater junkies.

A new cultural center should include performance and exhibit spaces of varying sizes and work to build bridges between different audiences, taking a cue from smaller venues around the city that house film, theater, live music, and visual art. It should vary curtain times -- post-work concerts, late-night weekend performances, Sunday brunch gallery openings -- and make a commitment to keeping tickets affordable.

During the economic boom, Manhattan was arguably more successful at selling and displaying art than creating new work. The World Trade Center cultural infrastructure should make room for independent artists and cultivate the graphic arts, television, and film industries already based downtown. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation should consider proposals from smaller and less-established arts groups, and the city should offer subsidies and tax incentives to create affordable artists' studios and living space around the cultural center.

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