

Security by Design; An Architect's View on the 10th Anniversary of 9/11

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We're rapidly closing in on the 10th anniversary of one of the most terrible days in our nation's history. The attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon erased what turned out to be a false sense of security.

We woke up on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, believing that the vast oceans that separated us from much of the rest of the world would keep us safe. I was actually working on the "happiest place on earth" at the time and there were thousands enjoying the Magic Kingdom while we were building a new attraction. When we went to bed that night, even those who were able to sleep felt a new chilling sense of vulnerability.

Ten years later, a reflexive hunkered-down mentality persists.

Consider the drawn-out controversy over the design of the lead tower of the new World Trade Center complex in Lower Manhattan. The tallest building in the United States, standing at a symbolic height of 1,776 feet, will rise from a bombproof base that critics have compared to a concrete bunker.

In Washington, D.C., the National Park Service is considering ways to secure the Washington Monument from attack. In one proposal, visitors would gain access through an underground door and atrium. Across Constitution Avenue and opposite the White House, President's Park South was the subject of a National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) design competition earlier this summer. Over the past decade, this area has been littered with Jersey barriers and makeshift fencing. Having walked around the Mall last spring, the place looks like an abandoned construction site.

The impulse to spruce up the park is commendable. Yet why was design thinking an afterthought? The message is clear: Security and design operate at cross roads. The architect's role has been relegated to masking the more unpleasant aspects of contemporary life.

Of course, protecting those who use the buildings and the spaces we design has to be a priority. But what's new about that? Security became a design issue for architecture and architects when the first humans moved out of caves. It's no less a concern in an age of international terrorism.

Yes, the stakes are higher and the damage that can be inflicted by a single determined terrorist is frightening. Yet a free society that values access and openness must not be frightened into a defensive posture that subverts the most precious values of our democracy. It's incumbent upon us as a nation—and those of us specifically entrusted with the public health, safety, and welfare—to factor in the most advanced thinking about security before disaster, in whatever form, occurs. Design is more than skin-deep; it's about preventing harm, not coming in afterwards to tidy up the debris.

This past April, the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) rolled out new Design Excellence Guiding Principles. With assistance and input from the American Institute of Architects, OBO is adopting Design Excellence as both a tool and a solution for advancing a new generation of secure, high-performance, and sustainable facilities that support the conduct of American diplomacy—and, not so incidentally, convey American values.

The action taken by OBO underscores the fact that security and design excellence are not separate matters to be reconciled. Security is the nexus of a broad spectrum of design decisions, ranging from how a structure performs under stress to the way it uses energy. It's what we do.

To be alive is to be at risk; to live freely carries the greatest risk of all. Our role as architects is to secure the open space in which a democratic people can continue to risk without fear the bold adventure that is democracy, and to live the values of openness and freedom of movement that have made our nation great.