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The Secret of Park51

How would it look? We just don't know.

Sarah Williams Goldhagen October 12, 2010 | 12:00 am



Do we really know what the new Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero would look like? For weeks, we have heard and read that Park51 is in fact *not* a mosque, with its developers contending that it is modeled on two very American building types: the Jewish Community Center and the YMCA. Early sketches of the project suggest this much is true.

Park51's developers recently posted on their website three conceptual drawings of the center by the New York-based SOMA architects. Inside, there will be a 500 seat-auditorium, and several floors will be given over to a fitness and sports center, including a swimming pool. One floor is designated for a childcare center and a playground. JCCs and YMCAs do not have chapels on their premises, but Muslims are required to pray five times a day, so Park51 will contain two prayer halls, called *musallas* to differentiate them from a formal mosque. One will be for men, one for women, and both will be located below ground level.

On the structure's exterior, SOMA has depicted a white, irregular lattice-like screen façade, a contemporary reinterpretation of the elaborate, cut-stone Mashrabiya sunscreens so prevalent in traditional Mughal buildings. Regular geometries are by turns employed, then pulled out of shape; in this sunscreen of zig zags and falling diagonals, some apertures seem more like windows poked in walls; others, more like window-walls held in place by thin concrete struts. Midway up the building, and again toward the top, where the façade is most open, the geometries offer up an evocative, symbolic surprise—a kind of daisy chain of interlaced hexagrams, a decorative symbol that Jews, Muslims, and Christians share. The interior views suggest that similar geometries permeate the structure's rooms: At least, on the uppermost floors depicted, the goal seems to be to create a light, airy feeling and a dynamic circulation network that opens up floor-to-floor views of lower Manhattan.

But caution is necessary when considering what these drawings do and do not reveal about Park51. What they do reveal is this: Park51's projected image is a forward-looking, contemporary one. The patterning of the depicted façade and interior views is a clever, promising idea, taking a cutting-edge strain of contemporary architectural practice that employs and celebrates the complex parametric geometries made possible by new digital technologies and synthesizing it with traditional Islamic precedents, the long out-of-fashion postwar work of American architect **Edward Durell Stone**, and more. The ethos of the design is modernity and (depending upon how many Stars of David you see) inclusiveness.

What these drawings do not reveal is much, perhaps not even a single aspect, of what the *completed* Park 51 project will look like.

Renderings such as these are the stock-in-trade of architectural clients, be they real estate developers or museum directors, who are trying to curry favor with people and institutions who are indispensable to the success of their projects, or to overcome neighborhood or municipal opposition (of which there has been just a bit to Park51) by providing what is thought to be an appealing or unthreatening image. Such renderings in general, and these renderings in particular, are not necessarily presented in bad faith. But let's be clear: These drawings are marketing tools. They are not architectural designs. Park51's developers are hoping they will help bring reluctant opinionmakers and members of the public around to supporting the construction of the proposed Islamic Cultural Center near the World Trade Center site. SOMA, a very young and small firm, is listed as "architectural consultants" on the project, which means that neither it, nor any other firm, has been hired to come up with a final design. And, even if SOMA *had* been hired, New Yorkers' experience with the many, many design iterations of the so-called **Freedom Tower** should be enough for them to know that initial drawings for an architectural project are wishes, and that wishes often bear little if any resemblance to the finished building.

Those who wish to know what Park51, the actual building, will look like have no choice: They must wait and see.

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