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REVIEW > PRIME REAL ESTATE

Susan Morris reviews the new movie, *16 Acres*, about rebuilding the World Trade Center site.



COURTESY 16 ACRES THE MOVIE

16 Acres

Directed and edited by Richard Hankin,
Written by Matt Kapp, and Produced by
Mike Marcucci

www.16acresthemovie.com

On September 11, 2012, no politicians spoke at Ground Zero. That absence contrasted with 2011's tenth "Tin" Anniversary event, when Michael Arad's Memorial Plaza opened, with speeches by Presidents Obama and Bush, governors Christie and Cuomo, former mayor Giuliani, and former governors Pataki and DiFrancesco. What came next, however, was considerably less uplifting: the freezing of funds for the 9/11 Memorial Museum, marking the continued

dysfunctional normal for the World Trade Center site, which has been rebuilding since the attack in 2001.

Now, after seeing the intelligent documentary *16 Acres*, which opens with Bob Dylan's "Everything is Broken," we come to understand what is behind the saga of building at Ground Zero.

The film was shown at the Architecture & Design Film Festival, in New York in October. Our main guides through this feckless roundelay are two journalists, Philip Noble, author of *Sixteen Acres: Architecture and the Outrageous Struggle for the Future of Ground Zero* (2004), and Scott Raab, who has written about the site for *Esquire* since 2005. With a wicked sense of humor and resigned irony, these keen observers analyze and synthesize the actions, decisions, and motivations of a parade of characters. Interviewees include George Pataki, Larry Silverstein, Danny Libeskind, Roland Betts (Lower Manhattan Development Corporation-LMDC), Janno Lieber (WTC Properties), Kenneth Ringler (Port Authority), David Childs (SOM), Michael Bloomberg, Rosaleen Tallon (family member), Chris Ward (Port Authority), and Michael Arad.



It's an impressive collection, but obvious omissions include Paul Goldberger, who wrote his own book, *Up From Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*, (2005) about the same subject; John C. Whitehead, chairman of the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation and chairman of LMDC; and former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer.

Telling this story in film brings these personalities and their motivations to vivid life and shows their true colors (Pataki as a political opportunist and obstructionist, Silverstein as a sometimes tone-deaf-but-earnest businessman). Then there are the made-for-the-camera, fig-leaf media events like the laying of a cornerstone on July 4, 2004 (an irrelevant act, as cornerstones are not used in modern skyscrapers). That event had been prompted by Pataki's re-election campaign and the Republican National Convention.

Subsequently, the cornerstone's siting drew objections from the New York Police Department as too vulnerable, and was moved. As a result, the Freedom Tower scheme had to be scrapped and redesigned. (The irrelevant cornerstone was finally removed and now sits behind the engravers' headquarters on Long Island. Raab, meanwhile, fantasizes a scene of dumping the rock on Pataki's front lawn, ringing the doorbell, and racing away as fast as possible.)

Along with fantasy, the film lets us steep ourselves in the site itself, via reminders of the fits and starts of building at Ground Zero, the alphabet soup of stakeholders, the complicated rebuilding efforts. In contrast, 7 World Trade, also designed by David Childs and sited directly across the street, involved only Larry Silverstein and the Port Authority and was completed in 2006.

After the destruction of the twin towers, an immense architecture and planning opportunity arose for the city on what Raab called "perhaps the most valuable 16 acres on the face of the earth...at the center of the cosmos and fair game." But the ensuing saga can now be viewed only as a series of scrambled opportunities and mixed messages.

These skeins are effectively sorted out in this smart film. Nobel highlights that these yet-to-be-built office buildings were being asked to embody the nation's collective response—defiant renewal, a symbol of vengeance, and a symbol of healing. But as Paul Goldberger said in his book, "The greatest conflict was not between those who wanted to build and those who wanted the site to remain empty but between those who saw the priority of new construction on the site as primarily commercial and those who saw it as primarily symbolic and cultural." Rather than void the pre-existing agreement with the leaseholder and rethink the use of the 16 acres, the arrangement remained, thus dictating that the rebuilding utilize the equivalent space for the same designated purposes.

A prime example of the zig-zag trajectory is the competition for the master plan (largely interpreted as the design of buildings themselves), which turned out to be a charade. First, the LMDC, created by Pataki and Giuliani to oversee the rebuilding, chose a design by THINK (Shigeru Ban, Frederic Schwartz, Ken Smith, Rafael Vinoly). Pataki, however, disregarded the agency's choice and instead selected Libeskind's proposal.

Yet neither THINK nor Libeskind had the chance to realize their schemes, since leaseholder Larry Silverstein, who was paying for the rebuilding (as well as \$10 million per month in rent to the Port Authority whether any buildings existed or not), wanted his own architect, David Childs. A shotgun marriage between Libeskind and Childs didn't work. Nobel tells the story of how SOM staff removed the large illuminated model of the Freedom Tower while it was being displayed at yet another Pataki press conference, this one at Federal Hall.

The last Libeskind remnant—a "stick on top," reaching to the symbolic 1776 feet—was even lopped off as the model exited the hall, never to be seen again.

Michael Arad, who had to make his own compromises on the memorial, said, "It's easy to think about all of the strife, all the disagreement, to focus on this didn't go right, that didn't go right...Actually, in the big picture, something did go right, really right."

At present, four towers are in various stages of completion on the 16-acre site: 1 World Trade (no longer called the Freedom Tower), by David Childs; 2 World Trade, by Norman Foster; 3, by Richard Rogers; and 4, by Fumihiko Maki. As Philip Nobel said, "It's an incredibly healthy thing that the city responded to September 11 in classic New York fashion by beating each other up, and grandstanding, and political manipulation. And you can say, 'Oh, that's awful,' or you can say, 'What a wonderful thing that New York healed this big wound with more New York.'" Let's hope that it's worth the wait.

Susan Morris

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