




Libeskind Flags 9/11, Spurned Master Plan in New Condo Tower

[Email](#) | [Print](#) | [A A A](#)

Review by James S. Russell



Jan. 5 (Bloomberg) -- **Daniel Libeskind** has proposed a tower next to Manhattan's Madison Square with huge multifloor gashes hacked out of its tubular form. Were it to be built, it would be a crude and unavoidable reminder of the horrors of 9/11.

Is it Daniel's revenge? After all, he has dutifully defended the master plan at the World Trade Center as his vision was turned into a dour, money-sucking melange. For his pains, he was never asked to do a building at the site.

Elad Properties, when it was raking in record sums on the sale of apartments in the Plaza Hotel, may have thought that its golden touch could conjure one of the tallest and most daring towers of the condo boom.

Called One Madison Avenue, the rounded-corner tower rises as a glass shaft along the avenue at Park Avenue South and East 23rd Street to what could be a height of 900 feet. It would loom over the fabled 1909 Metropolitan Life spire, one of New York's skyline icons that soars on the parkside end of the same block.

Libeskind's design sits atop the 15-story full-block building that the Met Life tower crowns. He cuts his towers' glass exterior at the bottom as a billowing skirt to fit around the older structure's setback roofs.

Libeskind interrupts his glassy shaft with two jagged wedges torn out of the building in seven-floor-high chunks. He terraces the sloping surfaces into apartment balconies overflowing with greenery. He even runs a furry blanket of shrubbery up the exposed thick core containing elevators, stairs and such.

Garden in the Sky

Is he trying to evoke the tragic collision of those 9/11 jets in the gashlike shapes, then offering us a symbol of rebirth in planted balconies? By telephone he says no. Instead, the idea is to extend the greenery of **Madison Square Park** into the sky, to make "every apartment a penthouse," since most floors would open to one of the gardens.

The core and a few super columns would need to thread their way through the Met Life building, then down to bedrock. As they rise, the super columns divide like fork tines, into smaller columns to run less obtrusively through apartments, then unite again to zoom through the wedges of space.

This would be the most daring feat of engineering and construction proposed by a developer in years. There's no price tag yet, but it is not an undertaking for the faint of heart or the light of wallet.

Elad wasn't ready to reveal the design. It shows up in a new monograph of Libeskind's work: "**Counterpoint: Daniel Libeskind**" (Monacelli Press, 400 pages, \$60). The architect stressed that the design was preliminary and that much could change. The published design "is not really about the height. It's about an idea of the building," he added.

Review Process

It has yet to enter the city's months-long special-review process, according to an Elad spokesman, nor has Elad attempted to secure financing. Watching a plunging market and fending off lawsuits filed by disgruntled Plaza buyers, the developer may choose to wait years. (Elad's multibillion-dollar, Plaza-themed casino-hotel mega-project in Las Vegas is on hold.)

Whatever becomes of it, the condo design's discomfiting edge, unvarnished by the silky choreography of a luxury marketing rollout, captures a ruthless energy embedded in the city's DNA.

When New York was flinging bridges across the East River and throwing up towers higher than anyone had ever seen, genteel observers were appalled at the city's callous enormity.

Nowadays jaws drop at sight of the impossible skylines of gridlocked Shanghai, Hong Kong and Dubai. Will those cities one day inspire the same loyalty New York does? Asking such a question requires me to salute the sheer gutsiness of Libeskind's design, with its intention to try to make sense here of an unprecedented global scale of city building.

If only Libeskind did not so clumsily cross just about every line that used to define architectural civility. One Madison is conceived with a relationship to the Metropolitan Life tower in mind, but it cannot resist lording over it in terms of size and flabby proportion.

Libeskind could have tried to pull the tall buildings that line the park into an ensemble, but he didn't find the way -- or didn't care. Some finesse would have made a difference. Libeskind was never good at that, and now he's stopped trying.

(**James S. Russell** is Bloomberg's U.S. architecture critic. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the writer on this column: James S. Russell in New York at jamesrussell@earthlink.net.

Last Updated: January 5, 2009 00:01 EST

