

# Book Review: Battle for Ground Zero: Inside the Political Struggle to Rebuild the World Trade Center

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*After 9/11 came the question of what to do with Ground Zero. This book aims to go behind the scenes of the fight to rebuild, revealing how grieving families, commercial interests, and politicking bureaucrats clashed at every step of the way, confounding progress and infuriating the public. Nathan Bullock praises Elizabeth Greenspan's book for giving a voice to the people involved in all aspects of planning and building. Greenspan's emphasis on public involvement in architecture and urban planning will allow for all citizens to be better involved in future redevelopment projects.*

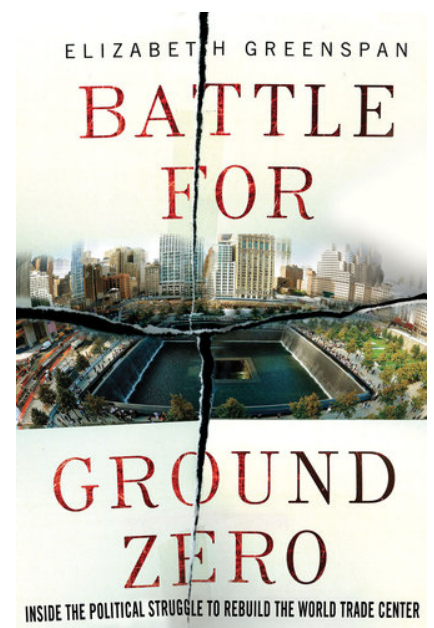
**Battle for Ground Zero: Inside the Political Struggle to Rebuild the World Trade Center. Elizabeth Greenspan. Palgrave Macmillan. August 2013.**

## Find this book:

In *Battle for Ground Zero*, Harvard professor [Elizabeth Greenspan](#) aims to give readers an insight into the ten year process of rebuilding the World Trade Center, which she began documenting from its outset in 2001. While much construction at the site is [yet to be completed](#), the timeliness of Greenspan's book is a testimony to the insights she has gained through years of dedicated research. It is striking to note that just as I began reading the book I found in my email inbox a [Change.org petition](#) to "Keep the September 11 Memorial Museum Free of Charge for Everyone". Greenspan has published work on this topic in both academic journals and popular media, including in [The Atlantic](#).

*Battle for Ground Zero's* mix of accessible language, exclusive interviews with key actors, and deeply personal tone reads partly like the work of a journalist, and partly like that of a memoirist. Through these interviews Greenspan allows the opposing sides to express themselves in their own words. The oft derided developer Larry Silverstein speaks of his instantaneous decision to rebuild, saying, "The people who have inflicted this upon us are clearly out to destroy our way of life ... it would be a tragedy to allow them their victory" (p.23). Greenspan provides the intimate details of architect Daniel Liebskind's outrage at compromising his designs, and includes Governor George Pataki's candid admission that the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LDMC) "was created essentially to give me control" (p.50).

Across three acts – each focusing on different constituencies and controversies – Greenspan argues that the events of 9/11 and the space of Ground Zero have many disparate interpretations for many different people. Quoting the creative director of the 9/11 Memorial Museum, "it can mean a clash of cultures, it can be grief, it can be confusion, it could be betrayal, it could be our justification for military power, it can be all of those things. And in fact I think it is all of those things" (p.217). With so many points of view represented, the story of this site and the process to re-create it is as much a part of both New York's and America's economic history as it is an integral piece of architectural history.



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In Acts I and II, titled “Visions and Visionaries” and “Divisions and Delays”, Greenspan pulls out the best of contemporary history, tempting the reader with new details about the rebuilding efforts beyond what they’ve seen on television or in newspapers. The benefit of chronicling these fields in a way that is targeted at a general audience allows for Greenspan’s second major argument to shine through – the public policy process is about engaging the people. In Chapter 6, “The People Versus the Port Authority” Greenspan describes her attendance at [Listening to the City meetings](#), where the only agreement was that “all of us disliked *all* six plans” (p.80). Oddly, readers will find no pictures, sketches or drawings of the proposed architecture and site plans that are so critical to the contentious discussions being held throughout Act I.

In



Ground Zero site at night, 2006. Credit: [Angela Rutherford](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Chapter 5, “The Fence”, Greenspan shows how no aspect was free from the weight of meaning that even a mundane fence could imply. Each detail could spark an enormous backlash either from families or city officials. The author recounts the anonymous messages left behind, the visual and textual history that was so arduously erased and meticulously removed by various authorities and volunteer personnel. By the time the reader reaches the title-less Act III, the frustration of inaction to reach an amicable solution is apparent. Just when one expects the denouement another controversy, Chapter 14 “The Islamic Center” proves another possible derailment of the resolution. Neither Silverstein and Libeskind nor Pataki and Mayor Rudy Guiliani show signs of acquiescing as the drama draws to a close.

The final chapter, at times, seems too optimistic as if forgetting the previous ten years and 200 preceding pages that described the debacle of Ground Zero’s planning and redevelopment. It approaches with rose-coloured glasses the success of new leadership and the news that publishing powerhouse [Condé Nast will become a tenant](#) and move its headquarters from Times Square. These tinted lenses remain on while retelling the final interview with Larry Silverstein that does more to exonerate him as a hard-working octogenarian than the last man standing in what was a highly emotional and sensitive tug-of-war between public and private constituencies of architects, planners, politicians, and everyday Americans.

Greenspan's training and experience allow her to step out of the university and onto the streets, where this book integrally gains both its content and audience. While not likely to be read in a classroom or on the beach, Greenspan's emphasis on public involvement in architecture and urban planning will allow for all citizens to be better prepared and involved in future redevelopment projects or their own local monuments, memorials, and skyscrapers. Her urban ethnography methodology does what so often failed to happen in the hands of idealistic and opportunistic politicians, bureaucrats, and commercial interests – give voice to the people.

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**Nathan Bullock** is a researcher of space, place, and identity with a focus on the topic of citizenship in urban geographies. He spent a year in Singapore on a Fulbright Fellowship and is now continuing his research in the MSc Human Geography and Urban Studies program at the LSE. [Read more reviews by Nathan.](#)

