

The "Mosque" Problem: A Possible Compromise

Intentions to refurbish a derelict building two and a half city blocks away from the New York Trade Tower site (commonly called "ground zero") have produced a telling array of responses, some measured, some less so. Objections (including cries of outrage) were predictable. More remarkable, however, have been public statements of support coming from sources as varied as local religious leaders (including one Bishop and at least one prominent Rabbi), first responders who survived the destruction, victim's family members, and politicians (including the Mayor, the district Congressional Representative and, most remarkably, Libertarian Ron Paul).

Some objections have focused on the erroneous belief that the building is to serve solely as a mosque, and this is seen as an insult to Christians and Jews who were killed nearby. Skipping for a moment the problem of defining what counts as "nearby," this objection overlooks the fact that large numbers of Muslims (about 300 of them) were also killed in those buildings, along with some number of Hindus, Buddhists, non-believers, and others. Nobody has a corner on grief, anger, and loss in such terrible circumstances, and nobody should claim one. That is an affront to humanity, and beneath decency per se.

The project leader, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, has stated that the build-

ing is meant to serve as a cultural center and a way to show that the hijackers responsible for the chaos are neither typical nor representative of Islam. There are plans for a prayer room, but the building will not be a mosque in either appearance or function. This, however, only fuels the paranoid fires of conspiracy theorist's imaginations and the bottomless pit appetites of political opportunists who feed on fear, suspicion, anger, and prejudice. They apparently

believe that Imam Rauf intends to provide a "secret" recruiting place for Al Quida where evil anti-American plotters can gather to gloat over their suicidal success, and they ignore the facts that Rauf has a long history as an official U.S. diplomatic representative to the Mid-East and an even longer history working with the FBI in counter-terrorism.

Opponents also ignore that pesky distance problem, and everything it implies. There are genuine fanatics (like demagogic radio propagandist Bryan Fischer or the almost laughably histrionic Pamela Geller) who would ban all new Mosque construction in the U.S. and seem to be a short step away from proposing concentration camps or deportation for anybody who is Muslim or who expresses any tolerance for Muslims. These same characters, however, would have nothing to say about erecting a Roman Catholic Cathedral within two and a half city blocks of the Murrow

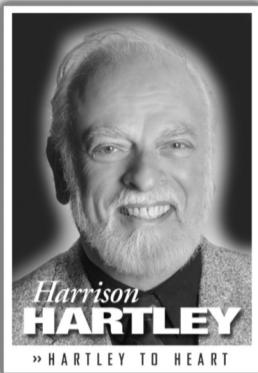
Building site in Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh, author of the other most successful terrorist attack on American citizens, was raised back East, you know... as a Roman Catholic. Is "what's good for the goose good for the gander?" Not if you're a fear-mongering opportunist willing to sacrifice every iota of reason, compassion, and decency in order to play on other people's raw emotions, get your face in the news, and maybe score a few tawdry political points. For people like Fischer and Geller, "far enough away" is "nowhere" and nothing will satisfy them until the entire world conforms itself to their image: a really unsettling thought.

There are problems with the site that ought to be carefully considered. St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church was just across from the Towers, and is having difficulty obtaining permission from the NY Port Authority to rebuild (despite a long history in the spot). In the matter of "appropriateness," it has already been noted that bars and strip clubs operate much closer than the proposed Islamic culture center, but the primary insult has hardly been mentioned: plans for a 55,000 foot shopping mall and transportation hub under the tower sites in the very ground itself. If that doesn't count as a sacrilege, it's hard to know what would.

So the questions boil down to these: is it legal and ethically proper to have an Islamic culture center two and a half blocks away from "ground zero?" Yes. Is it wise? Given that national

opinion runs about 70% against it and the definitive purpose of the center is "bridge building," probably not. Time will erode much of the negative sentiment (though tribalist fanatics will always be quick to pour fuel on the fires of suspicion and bigotry if it serves their purpose), but there may be an interim solution. What if, instead of an Islamic cultural center alone, one or two other adjacent derelict buildings were to be converted to cultural centers dedicated to Judaism and Christianity? With Islam, these are the Abrahamic religions (all trace their roots to Abraham) and each could demonstrate by cooperating in a joint effort a real dedication to understanding, unity, and compassion rather than suspicion, division, and enmity. Any way you take it, it's a nice idea.

In fact, it's probably too nice. It's idealistic and makes far too much sense for anybody who prefers to operate mostly on emotions (and heightened emotions at that). It would never appeal conspiracy theorists (who would only see it as another conspiracy) or to political opportunists (who never miss a chance to keep things stirred up because an angry, stirred-up electorate is easier to hoodwink). It wouldn't appeal to religious fanatics either; the "true believers" who think (their version) of the Deity sits up nights to admire them. For the rest of us, however, it has possibilities, and is at least worth thinking about.



East Side Park...Where?

Duane Thies | Staff Writer
SAINT JOSEPH TELEGRAPH

It's a good idea, but does it need to be in that location?

That is my reaction to the plans to create a park and build a YMCA extension building near the Shoppes of North Village. St. Joseph has one of the best park systems of any city in the country, and they are tied together by an awesome and historic parkway system. It is augmented by the neglected Riverfront Park (which needs work) and the Heritage Park ball fields. There is also Mitchell Park, Patee Park and France Park. St. Joseph has grown substantially toward the east since 1960, but the amount of green space on the east side of the city is sparse.

There is green space—in campuses and in a few other locations. One green space is the Mark Youngdahl Conservation Area. But there is no playground equipment there. There is a picnic table and shelter, however.

There is green space on the Western Reception Diagnostic and Correctional Center, which is on the grounds of the former State Hospital, which moved across



Frederick Avenue to become Northwest Missouri Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center.

There is green space at Missouri Western State University. And there is a walking trail near the Missouri Department of Conservation offices on the north part of the campus.

There is green space north of Heartland Regional Medical Center. But new buildings continue to make that area smaller. At one time, there was a walking trail, but that was wiped out when the Cancer Center was built.

There is a small playground in the middle of "The Zoo," which is north of St. Paul Lutheran Church. That area was originally to be a location for a school and is still owned by the St. Joseph School District. Again, there is no playground equipment.

There is a playground at Hochman Park in the Deer Park Subdivision, and there is some playground equipment.

A few years ago, there was a plan for a major new recreation park near St. Joseph Christian School, but that was defeated at the polls. It is a long way from eastern St. Joseph to Krug Park or Hyde Park. Even Bartlett Park is a long dis-

tance away.

It seems to me that the City of St. Joseph needs to create some small "pocket parks" in various areas in the east and possibly north sides. These could have some playground equipment and a picnic table. Perhaps, with these, the creation of a park near the Shoppes would make sense.

Perhaps, some parks could be planned near creeks or in flood plains. *Maybe, a park could be planned near the 102 River, where another small riverfront could be created. One such place may be at the former Horseshoe Drive-In Theatre.* But don't look for a park in a floodplain to be open year-round.

A new park would make St. Joseph a better place to live, which is a goal of all city residents. (Duane Thies is a long-time staff writer for *The Telegraph* who recently returned to our staff.)

VAN VICKLE MONUMENTS, INC.

1717 Frederick Ave. | St. Joseph, MO 64501
[816] 232-5882 | [877] 232-5882

The East Side Deserves a Park

Even though I represented the south side when I served on the City Council, I always tried to look at the "big picture."

Most of the city's recent growth has been to the east and northeast, so it seems right and reasonable that a park is needed in that area. We have large parks in the city's north, south and central areas.

I had the benefit of reading Duane's column before writing mine. He makes some good points.

One he did not make was that the St. Joseph School District still has long-range plans for a new school in the northeast part of the city. They have a playground and an athletic field included in those plans.

I have to agree with eastside resident and *Telegraph* writer Duane Thies, it seems like a location could be found a little closer to the middle of the east side--like somewhere in the vicinity of Frederick Blvd.

Maybe he is on to something by suggesting a 102 River-front park.

