CHAPTER 4

Democracy Deferred:
Lessons for the Future

From the standpoint of the individual, [democracy] consists of having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods, which are common.


Since the tragedy of September 11, a remarkable constellation of public and civic networks have arisen in New York, all of whom came together to find common ground by participating in the Civic Alliance. Moving forward, these networks have forged a set of commonly held principles and functions...to support a rebuilt Lower Manhattan that can fuel economic growth in the region and do so in a way that is both socially equitable and environmentally sustainable for today’s workers, residents, and visitors and tomorrow’s children.


What artists do is look at the impossible and make it possible.


Introduction: Visionary Democratic Ideals and Mixed Results

A shared commitment to an ethos of participatory democracy motivated a group of middle-class professionals—urban planners, architects, sociologists, lawyers, business leaders, and others—to found
four key post-9/11 civic renewal coalitions to promote healing and hope by creating real opportunities for a citizen voice in rebuilding Lower Manhattan. The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York (Civic Alliance) was their joint creation: a network of 75 other coalitions, institutions, and community-based organizations through which they planned and implemented a two-phase effort over a five-year period (2001–2006). As the most visible moments of this extended process, they organized two Listening to the City mass events that were led by civic engagement consultants. AmericaSpeaks, the second of these events, brought out more than 5,500 citizens as well as top elected and appointed officials and generated extensive national and international media coverage. Before and after these mass meetings, the Civic Alliance partnered with the Municipal Art Society (MAS) to hold more than 230 smaller, lesser-known “listening” events in neighborhoods throughout the city and the metropolitan region, taking the planning process “to the people” to increase the racial, ethnic, and class diversity of the participants through local sponsorship and accessible locations. Likewise, partnering with Imagine New York, the Civic Alliance held 25 visioning charrettes that were led by urban planners and architects. They produced five major reports, including Beyond 16-Acres, which influenced the development of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030 and became resources for use in other cities.

Clearly, the Civic Alliance, including the leaders of the other three post-9/11 coalitions studied here—Imagine New York, New York/New Visions (NY/NV), and Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R.Dot)—worked tirelessly toward a shared transformative goal: to move beyond the limitations of “business as usual” in the rebuilding process toward a more pragmatic ideal democratic balance of including citizens in deciding what, if anything, should be build on the “holy ground” where the World Trade Center (WTC) had stood. At the same time, these coalition leaders worked hard to get a hearing for citizens’ long-held dreams that more workforce housing, more arts spaces, a better transportation flow, a greener streetscape, a more balanced economy, and a more vibrant ethnic mix would emerge in the surrounding Lower Manhattan neighborhoods “beyond the sixteen acres.” Despite the serious intentions and determined efforts of their leaders, however, only one of these four civic renewal coalitions—NY/NV—is still functioning and striving to use professional and social influence to rebuild Lower Manhattan along the more inclusive lines originally envisioned in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.