

St. Nicholas National Shrine, Sacred Space at the World Trade Center

Judith Dupré | May 23, 2017

Questions about safety are rife at the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan because of the site's unique history and the sheer number of people there on any given day. To get inside the heads of garden-variety pickpockets and those with darker motives, the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey, which owns the site, has integrated an array of security features. Some—sally ports, credentialing booths, street bollards—are visible, while others, delineated in classified documents, are known only to a few. To quantify these efforts in another way: from the 2015 operating budget of \$2.9 billion, about \$800 million will be spent on security. Patrick J. Foye, the Port's executive director, agrees that it is "a shockingly high number, but given the demands of the 9/11 world, not surprising."

Perhaps the best indication, however, of the extent of these precautions is the presence of St. Nicholas National Shrine, the diminutive Greek Orthodox church that is now under construction above the site's most dangerous spot, the subterranean Vehicle Security Center, where all entering vehicles are screened for explosives.

Moreover, St. Nicholas is the only religious structure at the Trade Center, now reconstructed after the original buildings were destroyed in the attack.. When it's completed in 2018, the church will be open to the public seven days a week, a place for believers and nonbelievers alike. Greek Orthodox rites, which typically involve outdoor processions, will continue here, where the role and presence of religion has been deeply contested.

Clearly, for many reasons, the church is vulnerable. This does not trouble Father Alexander Karloutsos, Protospesbyter of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and also a Port Authority chaplain. "We believe in the resurrection, so to be concerned about location would be antithetical to our faith," he says. "Everybody knows the word xenophobia, a Greek word, which is fear of a stranger. Well, there's another Greek word, philoxenia, which is the love of the stranger. This church will be one of philoxenia, and people will always be able to come and be embraced, affirmed, and supported." In late 2016 a temporary Justinian cross was installed atop St. Nicholas's dome, the first overtly religious symbol at Ground Zero. Steven Plate, who directed World Trade Center construction for the Port Authority, reiterated that inclusivity, welcoming all denominations and creeds.

The church's privileged location relative to the overall site was decided after years of litigation. The original St. Nicholas was founded in 1916 at 155 Cedar Street in a row house that was once a tavern. The church, one of four Christian houses of worship near the Trade Center, was the only one destroyed on September 11, crushed when the South Tower fell. Because the Port Authority needed the Cedar Street parcel and its air rights for the Vehicle Security Center, the parish agreed to move. However, years passed as the agency and the church negotiated where to locate the new sanctuary and how much the authority would contribute to its rebuilding. Finally, in 2011, the archdiocese swapped its Cedar Street site for the Liberty Street location, and agreed to a smaller church. The Port bore the expense of constructing the church's platform and foundations; the church paid for costs from the platform up. Santiago Calatrava won the competition to design the church in 2012. Construction began in 2014.

Wisely, Calatrava did not seek to compete with the Trade Center's other signature structures, including his own Transportation Hub, all of them virtuosic displays of technology. Instead, his design is distinguished by its simplicity. Calatrava mined the distant past for its forms and inspiration. The church—a circular domed building bracketed by four towers—combines elements of two landmark churches in Istanbul: the Hagia Sophia and the Church of St. Saviour in Chora (also known by its Turkish name, Kariye Camii), a cultural treasure second only to the Hagia Sophia. Calatrava's design synthesizes the structural, historical, theological bases of these earlier churches and, appropriately at this location, melds Eastern and Western symbolism.

The structure is a double-wall construction. The exterior concrete walls are sheathed in glass panels that contain thin sheets of white Pentelic marble, quarried in Greece. At night, illuminated by LEDs, the marble becomes translucent and glows. During the day, the church appears to have been cut from solid stone. Just over 48 feet in diameter, the dome is scalloped with 40 ribs. It is supported by the corner towers, which also provide ventilation and house mechanical systems for the church and lower garage. Forty clerestory windows, echoing those at the Hagia Sophia, bring sunlight inside. Clear glass windows on the eastern and western sides invite in additional light. There are no windows on the south or north sides. The design encourages the act of turning inward, rather than outward, for solace and strength.



The church fulfills two roles: It operates as a regular parish, conducting weekly services, as well as baptisms, weddings, and ordinations. Secondly, the Greek Orthodox Church of America has designated it a National Shrine, signaling its larger significance.

While St. Nicholas owns the church building, everything just outside that structure is a public park, which anyone, including the parish, can use. This is noteworthy in light of the importance of processions in Orthodox liturgy. On Good Friday, for instance, church members mourn the crucified Christ by carrying a flower-covered coffin through the streets. Again, Father Alex is not worried about how New Yorkers will respond to these displays, pointing out that free religious expression is a tenet of the American democracy.

St. Nicholas's hospitality will include and welcome the stranger. In fact, the parish is singularly proud that Greek Orthodoxy, a religious super-minority in the US, has been called to be the sole religious presence at the Trade Center. Mark Arey, who helped coordinate the competition to design the church, says, "It somehow seems appropriate to me that the path forward should go to a real minority in the culture. Let the minority build it, let the minority share with the majority, and show that there is a place for everybody in our culture."

The church sits on Liberty Park, an elevated precinct that stretches the length of the 16-acre site and overlooks the memorial plaza. Conceived as a colorful camouflage and green roof for the security garage beneath it, it had to accommodate both garage and church. The Downtown Streetscape Partnership (DSP, a joint venture of AECOM and Jacobs, Inc.), in collaboration with the Port Authority, designed the park. The design locates St. Nicholas on a stone base so that it appears to be built on a plateau, reminiscent of how churches are sited on Mediterranean hillsides. Although Calatrava wanted to eliminate the park altogether so the church would sit on a flat plaza, the park designers agreed to a curved forecourt in front of the church. Another task was siting and disguising five aboveground ventilation shafts that service the lower garage; typically, such shafts are a security nightmare, since people can throw things into them. To make them feel intentional, DSP treated them as architectural features, and not something to hide with, say, landscaping. The two vents by the church are clad in matte glass that magnifies the greenery around it.

Meeting the stringent safety standards imposed on all Trade Center buildings increased construction costs considerably. Originally budgeted at \$25 million, the 200-seat sanctuary's final cost will be closer to \$44 million, funded by the Greek Orthodox Church of America and patrons from around the globe. Additionally, St. Nicholas has established a dedicated security committee that will liaise with New York City and Port Authority police departments to develop specific safety parameters for the church before it opens.

All buildings on the site are continuously monitored from several angles by [EarthCam](#) webcams, which yield high-resolution images up to a gigapixel in size. A security measure, the webcams also allow client and contractor to observe jobsite activity and to visually document construction over time. Such footage stimulates fundraising as well, inspiring patrons and would-be patrons to track the church's progress.

Both beacon and blessing, St. Nicholas anchors the World Trade Center, transmuting its sad past into future hope. Rising amid a vast commercial enterprise, it illuminates eternal, sometimes dissonant truths—us versus them, light versus darkness, wholeness versus brokenness—with forceful simplicity.

