



LIVING STONES

## The Rebirth of Saint Nicholas Church

**Santiago Calatrava**

Last year, I had the honor of being part of the blessing ceremony of the ground on which St. Nicholas National Shrine is currently being built. Very inspiring words were spoken during that ceremony, and it could be sensed that the foundations of this project are being formed of something more than just concrete and steel. Hope, a spirit of renewal, and an aim for reconciliation were bound into the site and materials during that ceremony.

That ceremony reaffirmed my belief that this project will become much more than just the reconstruction of the church that was destroyed during 9/11. It will become a phenomenal symbol of unity, a symbol of overcoming adversity and re-emerging from difficulties.

As I mentioned during that ceremony, on September 11th I was in Athens working on the projects for the Olympic Games. I like to draw a parallel between what I saw in Plaka on one of my visits and the renaissance of this church in New York. In Plaka, it is noticeable how the ancient Greeks integrated the columns of the destroyed Parthenon into the walls of the Acropolis. A new Parthenon was built and it was so extraordinary that it not only survived until the present day but became undoubtedly the paradigm of classical architecture.

In confronting the challenges of the design of a new church that had to respect the traditions and liturgy of the Orthodox Church, but at the same time reflect that we are living in the

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21st century, I gathered inspiration from the symbols of the Orthodox Faith, and particularly from the Hagia Sophia, which I consider to be the architectural paradigm of the Orthodox Tradition (similar to what the Parthenon is to classical architecture). The new church is organized around a central dome. The skin of the drum and cupola is divided into 40 faceted panels in recognition of the 40 windows under the dome of Hagia Sophia. The corner towers are clad in alternating large and small horizontal bands of white and grey marble, reminiscent of the Church of the Holy Savior in Chora. Taking the Church of the Rotunda in Thessaloniki and the Hagia Sophia as models, the nave of the church lies under the all-embracing span of a central cupola, at the center of which is the Image of Christ Pantocrator.

Although St. Nicholas is very different from its historical predecessors, the singularity and clear expression of the cupola, the subtle treatment of the exterior façade, and the strict implementation of the liturgical procession establish it in the great tradition of Greek Orthodox church architecture. It is entirely fitting that St. Nicholas, perched above the canopy of the oak trees at the the World



Trade Center Memorial, shrouded entirely in stone and the only non-secular building on the reconstructed site, occupy its raised position within Liberty Park. As such, it will be a spiritual beacon of hope and rebirth for the congregation and the city, embodied through the hundreds of thousands of visitors who will pass through the World Trade Center site. ✱

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**Santiago Calatrava** is a world-renowned Spanish architect and engineer with offices in New York City, Doha, and Zürich. In 2005, he was awarded the Gold Medal by the American Institute of Architects. Calatrava was chosen in 2013 to design the rebuilt St. Nicholas church adjacent to the World Trade Center.