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THE BEST PART OF CALATRAVA'S WORLD TRADE CENTER PLAN

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Behold the architectural bombast of the Oculus, the newly opened main hall of the World Trade Center transit hub. But head westward to marvel at the site's most unexpectedly powerful space.

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In the spring of 2008, I travelled to Europe to report a Profile (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/01/winged-victories>) of Santiago Calatrava, the Spanish architect who had been appointed to design a new PATH station for the World Trade Center site. I'd told Calatrava that I was eager to see examples of his work, and he obliged in style, inviting me to accompany him on a whistle-stop trip—by private plane, rather than by railroad—between several countries and cities in which he had been commissioned to build large-scale civic structures. One evening, we flew from Zurich, where Calatrava keeps his company's European headquarters, and one of his homes, and where he designed his first railway station, to Liège, Belgium, where his monumental high-speed-train station was still under construction. The next morning, we flew south, to Valencia, Spain, his home town, where Calatrava has been responsible for designing several buildings that compose a cultural district called the City of Arts and Sciences. On the way, we touched down briefly at the airport in Lyon, the site of another of Calatrava's soaring, spiny stations.

Somewhere above the clouds over France, Calatrava and I talked about the transit hub at the World Trade Center that the Port Authority had commissioned from his company five years earlier. When the initial designs for it had been released, in 2004, it had been widely praised for its ambition and its symbolic resonance—it was to include two “wings” that would open and close to the daylight—though some critics had wondered about the estimated two-billion-dollar price tag. By the time Calatrava and I spoke, the project was already well behind schedule, and had grown more controversial, not least because its cost seemed as labile as its most celebrated architectural feature. A few days earlier, the *Times* had reported that an analysis conducted by the Port Authority had projected possible costs of close to three billion dollars, and that, therefore, it had been determined that adjustments to the design to reduce costs were unavoidable. (Later that summer, a revised design was announced: among other changes, the building's flapping-wing capacity had been renounced.)

Calatrava's impatience, that spring, was palpable. Any decision to scale back, he suggested, would amount to a failure of vision. “If people say it has to be a small

station—it's their station. It's not my station," he told me. "They will get the full measure of their personality." New York would get the station it wanted, he told me, though it might not get the station it deserved. He also made a radical, even perverse, suggestion of how the Port Authority might save money. It should wait a generation to build the grand, winged, light-filled hall—the iconic element of his design—and instead should focus on making sure the underground elements of the hub were executed as conceived. "This is my proposition: wait with the iconic part," he told me. "Let them build the part underground, because in sixty years they will not be able to build that part. Let the iconic part come later."

This month, seven years later than originally expected, the iconic part of Calatrava's PATH station finally opened to the public. From inside, the Oculus is as eye-popping as its name implies, consisting of ribs of steel, interleaved with windows, that reach to an arching strip of glass, a hundred and sixty feet overhead: a spine seen in negative. Underfoot, white marble tiles offer an almost liquid sheen, like an ice rink on an unseasonably warm day just before the Zamboni is loosed upon it. Shops will soon be installed in the Oculus, which can be entered without paying a transit fare and will be as much mall as it is station. But, for now, even as construction is still under way, the absence of commerce underlines the hall's considerable architectural bombast. At least as seen from the level that has so far been opened, the Oculus does not offer gradually unfolding subtleties. It is brazenly spectacular. The vast American flag currently suspended from an overhanging mezzanine at its eastern end is, perhaps, an understandable gesture in a site that bears such a heavy weight of history. Nonetheless, in context, it gives a visitor the uneasy sense that the space has been readied for an impending address by President Trump.

But as Calatrava insisted on our flight together, the Oculus should not be understood as commensurate with the station. To better appreciate what New York and New Jersey have received in exchange for the four billion dollars that is the transit hub's ultimate price tag, a visitor should turn from beholding the elevated curves of the Oculus and instead look westward. She should head down the wide marble staircase that leads to the still-unfinished lower hall, above the PATH-station platforms. In Calatrava's original conception, this lower hall was to be bathed in sunlight filtered through glass skylights set into the plaza above. The skylights were abandoned, after it was argued that they compromised the integrity of the memorial overhead. But the wide lower hall, which is roofed with undulating steel ribs, is a beguiling space, with sight lines unobscured by anything so mundane as supporting pillars. Calatrava's engineering is like the interior tailoring on a couture gown: you can't see how it works, but it looks gorgeous, and it costs a fortune to produce. Escalators lead down to pristine white platforms, still miraculously unbesmirched by flattened wads of gum. So far, the station seems to have been graced with the passengers it deserves.

Much of the western part of the station is still under construction. A visitor can prowl around the PATH station's temporary corridors, glimpsing, behind plywood, more of Calatrava's signature white curved ribs, the shape an abstraction of the space between an extended thumb and index finger. When this connective tissue is finally completed and revealed, it may offer subtler and more

suggestive complexities than the Oculus alone delivers. This, at least, has been the promise of the first part of Calatrava's design to open to the public, having been unveiled in 2013: the six-hundred foot tunnel of the west concourse, which runs from the PATH station to Brookfield Place, the development on the far side of the West Side Highway.

The corridor is at once imposingly cavernous and celestially illuminated. On one side rises a face of sheer white-gray marble, which poetically invokes the site's resilient slurry wall, the foundation of the original World Trade Center site that survived the towers' collapse. Overhead, Calatrava's white-painted ribs, at massive scale, tilt asymmetrically to a mezzanine walkway, before descending to form an avenue of white columns. The corridor feels at once futuristic and archaic. It offers the sense of sublimity that characterizes Calatrava's best work but that the Oculus, for all its bravura showiness, does not achieve.

To walk its hushed, columnar length is to experience something of what one can feel in a cloister, a space purpose-built for contemplation. The World Trade Center site cannot help but inspire sober meditation, even for those for whom it is a workplace, not a memorial. Every element of the rebuilt site, from the gleaming new towers to the landscaped plazas, is charged with the catastrophe that caused their construction, and that reshaped the political and civic landscape at home and abroad. It is for that reason that this corridor is, so far, the most unexpectedly powerful of Calatrava's contributions. It offers an interstitial pause, and grants a moment, as one goes from office tower to shopping mall, for reflection upon the true cost of its sepulchral peace.

Watch: Santiago Calatrava discusses his design for the Oculus with Architectural Digest.



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