

MIT Alumni Books Podcast | Power at Ground Zero

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the *Slice of MIT* podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

JOE This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni Education.

MCGONEGAL: Lynne B. Sagalyn, PhD class of 1980, is Professor Emerita of Real Estate at Columbia Business School. She's the author of seven books, most recently *Power at Ground Zero: Politics, Money, and the Rebuilding of Lower Manhattan* published in 2016 by Oxford University Press.

Lynne Sagalyn, thanks for joining me. Tell me about writing this book. What was harder about it, the writing or the publishing?

LYNNE SAGALYN: Definitely doing current history as it happens. Many times when you do a big research project, the event or the issue has had full discussion. This was current history, and that was hard. But it was made it a little easier by the fact that I had done a big book on the redevelopment of Times Square before that, and I knew the politics of New York. And I knew how to sort of tackle this big book.

But I wasn't really prepared for the intensity of what I would have to do because the project went on for so many years. And at first, I actually didn't even think I was going to write a book. I was writing a paper on the politics of planning. And that morphed into a big book.

And the hardest part was trying to figure out what the story line should be, and how to simplify out of the complexity a story line that would encompass the big events. In this case, there was so much detail and so much controversy that it took a while to figure out what that story line was going to be.

MCGONEGAL: And you research urban planning and real estate and teach it. Some would think, OK, this is going to be the urban planning book on Ground Zero and the development of it. But as many reviews have pointed out, this is the story of Ground Zero and the development of those 16 acres in the last 15 years.

SAGALYN: One of the things I've done in a lot of my writing in the last three books is really to tell about how plans get implemented and that process of implementation, which inevitably involves politics, changes the plan, and results in what we see.

So plans are the beginning for these large scale projects. But they're typically very complex, and they take years, sometimes decades, to implement. And in the process the market changes, the key elected officials change, and the ideas of what should happen get modified by politics of opposition and new factors that enter the equation. That's the piece I've always been interested in talking about, how and why the plans change.

MCGONEGAL: One original title for the book, or working title, was *Loss and Ambition at Ground Zero*. Why did you lose the word ambition in the final title?

SAGALYN: You know, I worked with my editor. First of all, I dropped the loss piece because the story, which is really a story of opportunity formed by tragedy, was focused much more on the ambition piece. And so by itself, the ambition in the title didn't seem to capture what was at play here. And what was at play over many controversies was the quest for power amongst the different government entities and private interests, including the families of the 9/11 victims.

And so power seemed to be the real story line. And this is the new story of how the built environment gets developed by the struggles for power a lot of different government entities and private interests because we don't have a single czar at the top pulling all the strings of how things happen. So power seemed to be the right title.

MCGONEGAL: Talk about reaction to the book to date-- I'm speaking with you six months after its publication or more-- from those in power, from families of victims, and reviewers.

SAGALYN: Well, the reviews, I'm really happy to say, have been very positive, and they've come from the big publications. And they've been all very positive, and I haven't had pushback from anybody who said I got it wrong. Quite the contrary. Many of the actors involved have said I got it right.

And this isn't a totally a matter of getting it right or wrong. I mean, it's important to get the facts right. There are always going to be people who will disagree with me on the interpretation of some events, and that's OK. In this kind of project, nobody really had the full command of what was going on. There were so many different fields of action and so many different players.

My job was to make sure I got all the facts right, get as many different alternative views on what happened in a particular controversy as were relevant. There are a couple of instances where I have three different explanations for why the Freedom Tower, which we now call 1 World Trade, was redesigned.

And I just lay them all out. I may have my own preference, which I think is the right, but the various actors had different notions of why it happened. In that instance and a few others, I just sort of lay it all out. But the reaction has been, fortunately, very positive.

MCGONEGAL: And how is your MIT education alive and well in this book?

SAGALYN: Very. I'm an interdisciplinary scholar, and I chose to go to MIT instead of other well-known institutions and to study in the urban studies department because that was the kind of intellectual flexibility, alongside intellectual rigor, that allowed me to develop a multi-disciplinary study program. It was and still is the foremost urban studies department in the nation. And it gave me a particular set of intellectual and analytical tools that have been really valuable my entire professional career, one reason why my husband and I have made a recent gift to MIT, because we feel it made our careers.

MCGONEGAL: You cite your husband in here, Gary Hack, PhD '76, which we will mention.

SAGALYN: Right. He was the urban designer on Daniel Libeskind's master plan for Ground Zero.

MCGONEGAL: And a few other alumni names in this book, alumni I might recognize. Structural engineer Guy Nordenson, who's certainly a prominent figure in the development of the tower. And plenty of debates along the way he had with Childs. And Hillary Balin, a friend of yours, I think, PhD '85.

SAGALYN: Very much a friend of mine. Balin, yes, very much a friend of mine. She is a personal friend, was a professional colleague when she was at Columbia. And had many a conversation with her about this book.

MCGONEGAL: And then I saw just in the research credits Andrew Turco is a younger alumni, I believe.

SAGALYN: Yes, he was one of my many research assistants. But he had a big job he had to collect all the editorials from all the three New York dailies for me over a 10-year period and analyze them for me, help me analyze them.

MCGONEGAL: You write that-- or one of your sources says people appreciate the psychological damage of September 11, the emotional damage, but not the economic damage. And you certainly follow the money in this book. It's really-- the story of the rebuilding and the story of the tragedy is the story of a landlord and a piece of land.

SAGALYN: This is Manhattan real estate, and there there's no way it wasn't about the value of that land.

And one of the most distinguishing characteristics of this rebuilding process was that it had to accommodate both the remembrance and rebuilding. And the rebuilding meant rebuilding the commercial aspect of the project on the same site.

A piece that I didn't even realize until pretty far in was how significant the public mandate to both remember and rebuild was incredibly significant. And it was so compelling a public mandate that it took priority over the prevailing property rights of both the Port Authority that owned the land and Larry Silverstein and his investment partnership, which owned the rights to manage the buildings on the site for 99 years.

What that meant was that those property rights had to be amended. That's almost an unprecedented situation, where you had a terrorist attack that, to some extent, not invalidated but pushed aside prevailing property rights to manage and act on an implicit public mandate of public interest to remember and rebuild.

And that's quite unusual. In a lot of the talks I've given I've made that emphasis because I don't think that's something anybody realizes. It was never quite explicit, but it was behind a lot of the controversies.

MCGONEGAL: At the same time, you note that by 2016, a lot of New Yorkers were a little bit more utilitarian in their attitudes towards the space than they had been 10 years prior.

SAGALYN: Yes, particularly the Calatrava transportation hub, which seems to be, for many New Yorkers, an excessive cost for a commuter train station and a shopping mall, which is what it is. A lot of us feel we could have spent some of that money on an additional piece of important transportation, like a one-seat ride to JFK Airport.

MCGONEGAL: In your acknowledgments you write that the last pieces of the story are still to be resolved and are continuing. Is that frustrating to you?

SAGALYN: No. No, because the pieces that are unresolved are three particular pieces. One is the cultural program, and that is frustrating to me and a lot of other people, whether it will actually happen on the site.

Second is there are two other sites. One is partially built, waiting for an anchor office tenant. And the fifth office site, there's controversy as to whether the LMDC or the Port Authority is going to develop it and whether it will be office or residential. And that's unresolved.

But no, I'm not frustrated by that. I'm only frustrated by the lack of culture on the site because the cultural piece was what they call the living memorial element of it. The rest will get built out. It's 75% built out, and in a period of 15 years, that's really quite something, given the emotional trauma and controversy. Most projects like this take 20, 25, or 30 years to build out.

MCGONEGAL: Let me ask, as somebody who's done such exhaustive research on the topic and its sundry history now, a project that was delayed and derailed at times. Can you look at the site of 1 World Trade or of the Calatrava piece with awe and wonder?

SAGALYN: I think the memorial pools and the park are beautiful, and I like to go there when I'm downtown and see how people react to the place. I think the office buildings are just what they are, office buildings. Some are better than others. What I really like is the way that the site is now part of lower Manhattan, not set off in a big super block that it was before.

I'm always very quiet and very contemplate when I go down there. And I don't mind people using it as a park. I think that's appropriate. But it is more than a park. It is a memorial, and most people are very aware of that and very respectful of that. I think people come to it to try to understand the event and its meaning, and are impressed by the rebuilding and certainly impressed by the memorial and the museum.

But I think we're all past the awe stage. New Yorkers are not awe people. You know, we kind of take it in stride, and we expect this kind of impressive rebuilding.

MCGONEGAL: Tell me what else you're reading right now.

SAGALYN: I'm reading a book about the building of the Erie Canal called *Wetting the Waters*. The Erie Canal was a really important infrastructure project that really connected New York and the rest of the mainland of the United States.

I'm reading a lot about editorial cartoons because, as you know, in my book I used a lot of editorial cartoons. I think they capture emotions and, in a humorous way, ideas that and criticisms that are more powerful visually than sometimes we can all express in words.

MCGONEGAL: The book is *Power at Ground Zero: Politics, Money, and the Rebuilding of Manhattan* by Lynne Sagalyn, PhD '80. Lynne, thanks for joining me.

SAGALYN: Thank you very much, Joe. It was a pleasure.

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