

The aesthetics of absence:

Rebuilding Ground Zero

ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the narratives and meanings that have been projected onto the space of Ground Zero in New York City since September 11, 2001, how they have been deployed for various political agendas, and how they have informed the ways in which the site will be rebuilt and memorialized. I investigate the changing meanings attributed to the dust and the footprints of the World Trade Center buildings and the debates over architectural designs and the proposed memorial. [cultural memory, place, mourning, memorial, architecture, tourism]

There was a moment on September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center in New York City became Ground Zero, perhaps at the moment when the towers collapsed downward, spewing out a cloud of debris that, as some witnesses said, “chased” down the surrounding streets. Within a few hours, the media had found the new name and it stuck.¹ Ground Zero is a name pulled from history, its origins inextricably tied to the destructive power of nuclear bombs; it began as a term used by scientists to designate a bomb’s point of detonation, hence, its site of ultimate destruction. *Ground Zero* implies a kind of nuclear obliteration in which the barren earth is the only thing that remains.

The term *ground zero* also conveys the idea of a starting point, a *tabula rasa*. Architect Michael Sorkin’s book about rebuilding New York is entitled *Starting from Zero* (2003). And, as Amy Kaplan writes, “We often use ‘ground zero’ colloquially to convey the sense of starting from scratch, a clean slate, the bottom line,” a meaning that, she says, resonates with the “often-heard claim that the world was radically altered by 9/11” (2003:56). The idea of ground zero as a blank slate thus enables a set of narratives about September 11—both the narrative that the site of lower Manhattan is the symbolic center of that event and the narrative that September 11 was a moment in which the United States lost its innocence. Throughout most of the nation’s history, U.S. self-image has remained firmly wedded to a kind of isolationist innocence, so that virtually every traumatic event of 20th-century U.S. history, from Pearl Harbor to the Vietnam War, has been characterized as the moment when that innocence was lost. As Mike Davis writes, New York, like the United States, had previously held a “messianic belief in its exemption from the bad side of history” (2001:34). This sense of historical exceptionalism hovers behind the nomenclature of lower Manhattan as Ground Zero—not only in disavowal of the original meaning of the term but also in the belief that history itself was transformed on September 11, 2001.

In the months and years since September 2001, Ground Zero in lower Manhattan has become a site of destruction and reconstruction, of intense

emotional and political investments, a highly overdetermined space. It is a place inscribed by local, national, and global meanings, a neighborhood, a commercial district, and a site of memory and mourning. The narratives that have been layered on Ground Zero reveal the complex convergence of political agendas and grief in this space, as if, somehow, the production of new spatial meanings will provide a means to contain the past, maintain the grief, and make sense of the violent events that took place there. The narratives and meanings produced at Ground Zero matter at the local level precisely because they have impacted in profound ways the redesign of an enormous area of a densely populated city and because they reveal the problematic relationship between urban design and the commercial interests that govern a metropolis such as New York. These meanings and narratives matter at a national level when they are deployed in the service of national agendas, within a broader global context in which images of the United States are exported with political consequences. Ground Zero is a site where practices of memory and mourning have been in active tension with representational practices and debates over aesthetics, a place, one could say, defined and redefined by a tyranny of meaning.

Dust

The towers of the World Trade Center were made of steel, concrete, asbestos, wood, plastic, and glass, they were filled with desks, computers, tables, and paper, and, yet, they crumbled into dust. In one of the most notable lines of the documentary film *9/11* (Naudet et al. 2002), a New York City firefighter who was on the scene says, "You have two 110-story office buildings. You don't find a desk, you don't find a chair, you don't find a computer. The biggest piece of telephone I found was a keypad and it was this big. The building collapsed to dust. How are we supposed to find anybody in this stuff? There's nothing left of the building." There was an unbelievability to the transformation of such formidable buildings into particles of dust. How could so many material objects be reduced so quickly to dust? My niece responded to news that her father's office in the South Tower had been destroyed by asking about the fate of her drawings that had been on display there—what had happened to them? Initially, I thought this response exemplified the narcissistic world of a six year old, but then I wondered if she was not asking the very question that was the most difficult to understand—the question of materiality. How could those buildings, those objects—those people—suddenly be gone?

Images of the immediate aftermath of the towers' collapse show a cityscape coated in dust. It lay everywhere like a few inches of snow, transforming the outline of

debris into a strange, layered set of shapes. In one well-known image by Susan Meiselas, a figurative statue sitting in a park is blanketed in dust and debris, looking like a businessman frozen in time (Figure 1). The owner of Chelsea Jeans, a clothing store that eventually closed down a year later for lack of business, kept preserved in a window rows of pants coated with the dust (Kimmelman 2002); an image of a tea set covered in the dust was featured in the *New York Times* (Archibold 2002); Mayor Rudolph Giuliani refused to clean the shoes he wore on his first trip to Ground Zero, which "were caked with the gray glue-like substance that sticks to everyone when they wade through the debris" (Ferer 2001: A21). People's experience of the trauma of that day was gauged in terms of their proximity to the dust—those who wandered the streets coated in it, who went home with it on their clothing, in their hair, on their faces.

The dust of the collapse of the World Trade Center acquired many meanings in the months after September 11. It was initially a shocking substance. Something otherworldly, unexpected, uncanny, yet also strangely familiar. Some of it contained recognizable scraps—papers, remnants of the ordinary business of life before that day, now transformed. Balance sheets from financial firms, previously objects of mundane business transactions, were transformed into historical objects, materials of poignancy and loss. It is easy to remember today that in the first few days after September 11, there was an urgency to find any survivors in the rubble, ultimately, a doomed mission. What is often forgotten is that the city also had an urgent need to clean up the streets of lower Manhattan near the New York Stock Exchange, so that the exchange could reopen the following Monday. Even as the shock of what had happened was still being registered, the city deployed an army of sanitation trucks to begin scouring away the dust. Thus, dust was initially understood as a substance that had to be cleaned away so that life could continue, as an impediment to moving forward. It was also quickly experienced as a form of contamination, clogging people's lungs. (And it was contaminating—record numbers of New York City firefighters now suffer from respiratory diseases. It remains to be seen over the next two decades how many will develop more serious diseases from their exposure to the dust.)

Soon, though, the dust was imbued with new meanings. Once it became clear that very few people had survived the cataclysmic collapse of the two buildings, the dust was defined not simply as the refuse of the towers' destruction, but also as the material remains of the bodies of the dead. Processes of grief often involve a need for a material trace of the dead. Throughout history, when people have mourned in the absence of remains, they have substituted ritualized objects (empty coffins, flags, photographs, or headstones) as touchstones, material artifacts



Figure 1. Sculpture in park near World Trade Center, New York City, September 11, 2001 (photograph by Susan Meiselas, © 2001 Magnum Photos, reprinted with permission).

that can provide some kind of corporeal presence to mediate the absence of a loved one. At Ground Zero, this need transformed the dust into a new kind of substance, one freighted with significance. As Patricia Yaeger writes, this transformation revealed the “impulse to convert this detritus into something hallowed and new” (2003:187). In October 2001, Mayor Giuliani set up a procedure through which each of the families of the dead received an urn of the dust from the site for a memorial ceremony. This dust (which was otherwise being hauled from the site to the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island) was gathered into 55-gallon drums, blessed by a chaplain at Ground Zero, and given a police escort to One Police Plaza.²

There, officials scooped the dust into bags, which they held in gloved hands. Each family was then given a five-inch urn of dust with “9-11-01” engraved on it, wrapped in a blue velvet bag (Waldman 2001: B11). Here the dust was transformed into a substance that was understood to be sacramental and ceremonial—moved from drums (indicating refuse) to urns (indicating individuals, ashes, the remains of life)—yet also official (accompanied by police escort).

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This phrase implies a distinction between dust and ashes. Ashes are unique, corporeal, whereas dust is more general. In her analysis of rubble as archive, Patricia Yaeger describes how some family members took comfort in thinking of their loved ones as part of the rubble, in “a sense of detritus as a space that gathers corporeality, of rubble as a site where bodily trauma passes through” (2003:190). It is one of the ongoing shocks of modernity that bodies can be simply obliterated through modern technological violence, that they can be vaporized, leaving nothing behind. Yet this shock is mediated by contemporary beliefs in technology and science, in the ability of science to provide definition and naming through high-tech identification. In New York, the forensic technique of DNA analysis was used to identify the dead, and the media reported regularly on the grim, yet heroic labor of the scientists and technicians who spent many months testing remains (and who had the agonizing duty of reporting the identification of each new body part to family members). In this context, science is understood to provide a concrete narrative of the status of the lost body, even if just for a fraction of a body. The announcement

that unidentifiable remains will be preserved as part of the September 11 memorial thus serves both as an affirmation of science (the preservation holds the promise that scientific advances will make identification possible in the future) and as a reinscription of the mystery of the body as an indicator of the uniqueness of an individual.

Yaeger writes that the detritus of the World Trade Center towers is disturbing precisely because its status is unclear—"Is it rubble or body part?" Because of its ambiguity, I would argue, the dust can be seen as a polluting substance, in Mary Douglas's terms. It coated surfaces with specks of life, death, body, paper, and building. The dust needed to be scrubbed away precisely because of its liminal status—as both refuse and body. And it was removed, thoroughly and efficiently, along with the larger chunks of building debris, to the Fresh Kills landfill. There, body parts were still sought, but the debris had already been transformed through its relocation into the category of rubbish.

Yet, even after it was relegated to the dump, the dust of Ground Zero continued to haunt precisely because its status was not that of trash. Dust is not, as Carolyn Steedman argues, about refuse or rubble so much as it is about a cyclical materiality. It is a reminder of continuity, a vestige of what was that continues to exist. The dust in the archive, she argues, evokes the material presence of the past—a "not-going-awayness" and an imperishability of substance. She writes,

This is what Dust is about; this is what Dust *is*. . . . It is not about rubbish, nor about the discarded; it is not about a surplus, left over from something else: *it is not about Waste*. Indeed, Dust is the opposite thing to Waste, or at least, the opposite principle to Waste. It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone. Nothing *can be* destroyed. [Steedman 2002:164]

In Steedman's terms, dust symbolizes the cyclical nature of material existence, both the reduction of material objects to dust and the gathering of particles into new forms. Attempts to preserve the dust are interventions in this cycle of materiality; as such, they are attempts to hold the moment of crisis in arrest and to charge it with meaning.

Sacred ground

As the realization took hold soon after September 11 that many bodies would never be recovered, the ground on which the towers had stood was declared by many to be "hallowed" or "sacred." The concept of "sacred ground" enabled many things at the site and has been a particularly powerful discourse both at Ground Zero and in national politics.

What does it mean when sites of violence are declared sacred? The term *sacred* implies a religious meaning, and it has been the case that many religious figures have performed ceremonies at Ground Zero. In fact, it is remarkable how quickly the site became Christianized, not only through the presence of priests who performed services for those working in the recovery operation, many of whom were Catholic, but also through the preservation of a cross constructed of two steel beams, which remains visible there. Yet the discourse of sacred ground at Ground Zero comes not from the blessings of priests but, rather, from the loss of life that took place there. Traditionally, in U.S. culture, ground has been considered sacred when blood has been spilled on it. When Abraham Lincoln famously conferred on the cemetery at Gettysburg the status of sacred ground, he did so in the name not only of the men who had died there but also of those who fought and lived: "But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract."

Not all battlefields are considered sacred, nor are all places of violent death. Gettysburg was an exception both because, at the time, it was understood to be an important turning point in the Civil War—an opportunity for the war's resolution—and because the intense violence there resulted in great numbers of dead. Yet the concept of "sacredness" at Gettysburg was from the beginning—and in Lincoln's speech this was quite explicit—related to the nation. It was the nation, "conceived in Liberty," that was under threat, and the work that Lincoln proposed for those who were present to hear him speak was that of ensuring that the "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." When death is transformed into sacrifice and made sacred, it is almost always deployed with such political intent.

Thus, in U.S. culture, the concept of a "sacred place" has been almost exclusively secular and national rather than religious. U.S. battlefields have most often been experienced, according to Edward Linenthal, as "sacred patriotic spaces" visited by "those who seek environmental intimacy in order to experience patriotic inspiration" (1991:3). The connections made between Gettysburg and Ground Zero explicitly infer patriotic meaning on the New York site. Indeed, when faced with the difficult task of choosing a text to read at Ground Zero on the first anniversary of September 11, Mayor Michael Bloomberg chose the Gettysburg Address, a move that explicitly situated the September 11 dead within the history of the sacrifice of soldiers who have died for the nation.

The status of Ground Zero as sacred ground is highly contested, precisely because of the potential limitations and broad effects such symbolic meaning has. Sacred

ground is charged with meaning. It implies not daily life but worship, contemplation, and a suspension of ordinary activities. In a sacred space, all activities have meaning, all are transformed into rituals. Sacred ground cannot be, for instance, a neighborhood, which is defined by the ongoing everydayness of life, work, commerce, and public interaction. Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely a kind of mundane everydayness and routine that defines the familiar sense of a neighborhood. Thus, notions of Ground Zero as sacred ground are antithetical to the stakes held by residents of lower Manhattan in their neighborhood and have been a constant source of concern for them. As Setha Low (this issue) writes, the relationship of the residents of lower Manhattan to their neighborhood has been dramatically disrupted; not only have the physical markers of familiar space been destroyed, but there has also been a huge change in the composition of who actually lives there. For residents, retrieval of a sense of the quotidian is crucial, something that is explicitly in contrast to prevailing notions of sacredness. Nevertheless, even though the residents' contention that they "don't want to live in a memorial" (Low, this issue) has provided a powerful intervention in the debate about how lower Manhattan should be transformed, their needs have been largely ignored and usurped by the city's favoring of commercial interests at the site. The dominance of commercial interests in reimagining Ground Zero has created a complex negotiation of space dedicated to memory and that dedicated to businesses and retail.

The inscription of sacred ground at Ground Zero has been so emphatic that it seems necessary to note that places of violence and loss of life do not automatically produce feelings of sacredness. In cities where violence is a factor of everyday life, there is often an insistence on life going forward rather than on inscribing a multiplicity of spaces of loss. The epic quality of September 11 and the immensity of destruction and loss of life there have necessitated its specialness, yet history offers many examples of cities that have been destroyed and rebuilt and in which only small areas have been designated sacred places in which to mourn, the vast majority of space having undergone renewal. Important consequences attend the amount of space at Ground Zero that has been designated as sacred in relation to the amount being reclaimed for everyday life.

The pile

The inscription of Ground Zero as a sacred space has generated conflict not only with regard to the site's relation to the surrounding neighborhood, but also in the context of its initial clearing. The massive amount of debris left at the site of the World Trade Center transformed it into a construction and engineering puzzle, which construction companies and crews had to undertake to

"unbuild" in a huge excavating task. In the nine months from September 2001 to May 2002, Ground Zero was a demolition site, divided into four quadrants, each of which was the province of a different construction company. The whole project was overseen by a formerly obscure department of New York City, the Department of Design and Construction.

In his book *American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center*, William Langewiesche writes that "at the heart of it, under the skeletal walls rising to 150 feet above the street, the debris spread across seventeen acres in smoldering mounds. It was dangerous ground, of course. Workers at the site called it simply, 'the pile' " (2002:11). Langewiesche's book, which has received significant attention as the only firsthand account of the recovery operation, describes the ways that the various groups involved in that operation—the firefighters, the police officers, and the construction workers and engineers—fought constantly over the meaning of the pile and how it should be treated. The firefighters were angry at the construction workers, who, they felt, used their enormous machines callously, as if the ground were not littered with the dead. The construction crews, for their part, were angry at the firefighters because they perceived them to be treating their dead differently than the civilians who died there. Langewiesche writes,

There was resentment by the police, who had lost plenty of their own people, and by the construction crews, who took it upon themselves to remember the far greater number of civilian dead. These tensions flared especially over the differing treatment of human remains—on the one extreme, the elaborate flag-draped ceremonials that the firemen accorded their own dead, and on the other, the jaded "bag 'em and tag 'em" approach that they took to civilians. . . . It was a surprisingly ganglike view, and it encouraged a gang mentality among others on the pile. [2002:70]

Langewiesche's depiction of firefighters as less than heroic has been the source of tremendous controversy. His book has been embraced as a relief from the emotionalism of Ground Zero hero worship and condemned as an account that renders individual firefighters invisible next to heroic engineers.³ The book's (now qualified) charge that firefighters participated in looting produced a particularly volatile debate because the sanctification of the firefighters has been so powerful. Yet it could also be argued that *American Ground* was inevitably controversial precisely because it situates Ground Zero within discourses other than that of sacredness. The book defines Ground Zero in unsentimental terms as an engineering problem—the problem of hauling away massive amounts of debris, steel beams, concrete slabs, and crushed vehicles and of rebuilding infrastructure.

The operation to remove the rubble not only conflicted with the desire to see the site as a sacred repository of the dead, but it was also relentlessly about clearing away, scouring clean, and wiping out the physical debris of September 11. Langewiesche's book ends with a scene in which the steel beams from the towers are loaded into a beat-up foreign tanker that will take them to China and India, where they will be melted as scrap. In the hurried context of unbuilding Ground Zero, there was little time for debate about what to leave behind. People occasionally suggested that certain parts of the ruined towers should be retained for a memorial; for instance, a few weeks after September 11, Metropolitan Museum Director Philippe de Montebello (2001) suggested that the ruin of the gothic skin of the towers that hovered over the site should be kept for a memorial. It is worth noting that throughout history ruins have often been incorporated into memorial sites to evoke the destructive power of hatred. Some of the most effective memorials of World War II, for instance, use the shell of a building, a ruin arrested in its deterioration, to convey the shock of violence and act as a cautionary in the present. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Coventry Cathedral in England both incorporate ruined structures to evoke a sense of the destructive forces that changed the meaning of those places. As Lisa Yoneyama (2002) writes, the question of what to do with the "vast remains of destruction" is always fraught with controversy.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which has jurisdiction over Ground Zero, retained approximately seven hundred artifacts from the site, which now sit in a hangar at JFK Airport (Lipton 2003), and the New York State Museum organized a traveling exhibition called "Recovery: The World Trade Center Recovery Operation at Fresh Kills," which includes over 50 objects. In addition, the city handed out a large number of artifacts from



Figure 2. View of Ground Zero, January 2004.

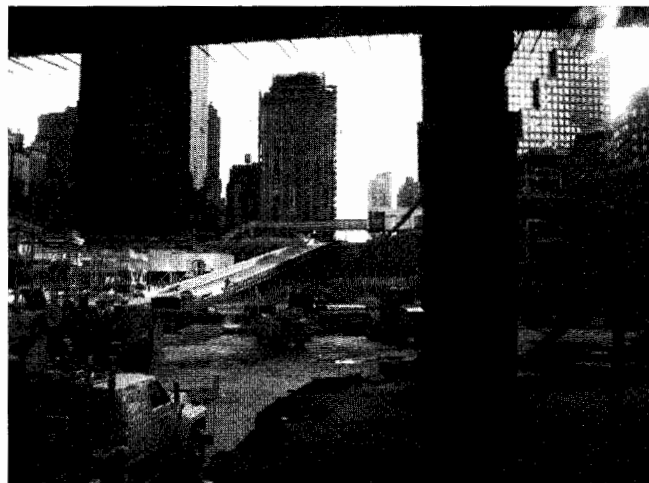


Figure 3. View of Ground Zero from the PATH train, January 2004.

Ground Zero to municipalities and organizations around the country for some of the many small memorials to September 11 that have sprung up, some of them in unlikely places (Hampson 2003). Plans to include a memorial center at Ground Zero are now under way to ensure that these objects—which include police cars, fire trucks, steel columns, and part of the television antenna from the top of the South Tower—will be transformed from refuse into artifacts of history (Dunlap and Lipton 2004). Although plans for the memorial center are not yet defined, this will probably be a museum at Ground Zero where these objects will be on exhibit.

The status of the refuse from Ground Zero and its relationship to the merchandising of memorabilia at the site demonstrate the complex ways in which memorialization and history-making intersect with tourism and the production of kitsch and curios. At first, the clearing away of the pile was designated an emergency and carried out away from the view of the public. Lower Manhattan was initially a restricted area, blocked off from view. Looking was discouraged and photographs forbidden, and the presence of the curious was frowned on by the police who guarded the perimeters. Marianne Hirsch (2002) writes that, initially, police told people at the site to "show respect" by putting their cameras away. By December, they had become more accommodating to the crowds; as one officer told me, "People have the right to look." In January, a well-designed viewing ramp was constructed adjacent to St. Paul's Chapel, and tickets were awarded for the view. By the spring, the *New York Times* and other publications were running travel features on where to eat downtown after visiting Ground Zero, effectively constructing the site as a tourist destination. When the recovery operation was declared finished in May 2002, and on each anniversary of September 11, ceremonies

have been held at the site, each declaring it to have been transformed. Today, the deep hole in the ground is easily viewed from designated areas along its perimeter, where tens of thousands of people go to observe it every day and where local merchants sell World Trade Center postcards and merchandise (Figure 2). People can now ride through Ground Zero on the PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) train, which resumed operation in November 2003. This commuter train to New Jersey, which existed long before the building of the World Trade Center and always operated at the lowest level of the site, several stories below even the subway, now seems a strange combination of both determined business-as-usual public transport and a Disneyland monorail-like tour through a strange and barren landscape (Figures 3 and 4). Ground Zero is no longer “the pile” but an enormous, gaping hole in the ground, a glimpse into the city’s infrastructure. It is a reminder that in this place, as in most of Manhattan, the city is as complex a metropolis underground as it is above.

The emergence of Ground Zero as a tourist site also redefines it as a commercial site. The underground mall in the trade center complex was, in fact, one of the most successful shopping malls in the United States. The demand to rebuild the site with commercial space equal in amount to that in the World Trade Center, conceiving of the space in terms that will maximize future profits per square foot, has been stipulated by real estate developer Larry Silverstein, who acquired the lease to the buildings right before they fell. This demand has usurped not only the demands of local residents but also the many ways of rethinking the neighborhood that have been advocated by urban planners (Sorkin and Zukin 2002). Architect Michael Sorkin writes that the process of redesigning lower Manhattan has thus been one of betrayal, one that, under

the guise of openness, has failed the public in the servicing of commercial and real estate interests. He argues that the process

has been corrupted by a meagerness of vision and a vanishing and over-aestheticized sense of loss. There is something nauseating about the celebratory atmosphere that has surrounded this act of “closure,” about the haste of it all, and about the wheeling and dealing that led up to it and continue as various parties vie for control of the site ... what a waste of energy and imagination! [Sorkin 2003:12]

The new economy of Ground Zero is unlikely to replicate the kinds of businesses that once filled the towers, as lower Manhattan is being reconceived through paradigms of tourism. Ground Zero is now a place where trinkets, souvenirs, and commodities are sold, the majority by street merchants who work the area as part of the complex informal economy of street vending in New York. The proliferation of commodities includes FDNY hats and T-shirts, NYPD dolls, and crystal replicas and innumerable photographs of the twin towers. Yet the transformation of Ground Zero from a place of emergency to a place of tourism is not in conflict with the desire to see it as sacred ground. Tourist locations, like sacred sites, are places of pilgrimage. Most people standing on the viewing platform the first year after the attack responded in ways that evoked both mourning and tourism—they looked shocked, they cried, and they took photographs of what they saw. Today, the site can evoke awe for the massive size and depth of the excavation. Yet its hold as a site of tourism is also the result of a kind of compulsion to look, the desire to see a place that is defined as being charged with meaning.

The footprints

The destruction of the World Trade Center was massive. It affected an entire area of the city, not only the five buildings of the trade center itself but also other buildings in the immediate area. The towers fell, surprisingly, inward, yet their debris covered a wide area, and people were killed not only in the towers but also in the surrounding area.

Yet, within this wide area, certain parts of Ground Zero are now considered more symbolic than others. Primary among them are the footprints of the two towers. New York Governor George Pataki promised the families of the dead early on that he would not allow buildings to be erected on the footprints of the towers, and, from the beginning, the many different design proposals for the site treated the footprints of the towers as a special location. The master plan for the site, by architect Daniel Libeskind, and the memorial design, *Reflecting Absence*, by Michael

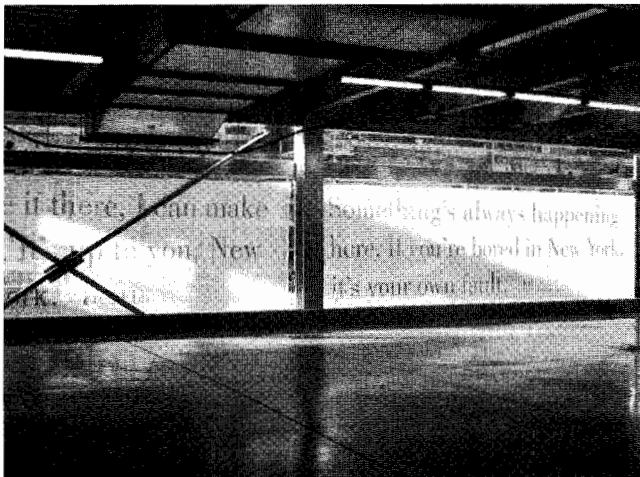


Figure 4. Temporary PATH station at Ground Zero, January 2004.

Arad and Peter Walker, fully inscribe this hierarchy of space, with the footprints designated as solemn and unique spaces, voids in a public plaza (Figure 5).

The importance placed on the two footprints of the towers is deeply ironic when one considers how the World Trade Center complex was experienced when it stood. The complex was notable for all the myriad ways, now seemingly forgotten by those who mourn it, that it did not integrate into the surrounding neighborhood. Individuals primarily experienced the complex from two vantage points: from high up in the towers themselves, looking down on the city, and from the underground complex of shops and public transportation on which the two towers sat. French philosopher Michel de Certeau once referred to the view from the World Trade Center as a god's eye view of the city, one that fulfilled "a lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (1984:92). He contrasted this view to the many meaningful acts that take place at street level, the "speech acts" of pedestrians that make meaning of the city's landscape. Yet, within the trade center complex, there was no street level and no speech acts that mattered. The plaza of the twin towers was notorious as a badly designed area, one that was not conducive to public gathering and, for most people, was not even the primary entry point to the towers. (Most people entered the towers from the underground complex that was connected to the subways and PATH train.) It is thus fairly safe to say that the foundations, or *footprints*, of the buildings were truly unremarkable while the towers stood. Indeed, in terms of their actual structure, the towers never had actual footprints on the ground. They reached upward to the sky from the underground mall into which they were integrated. To

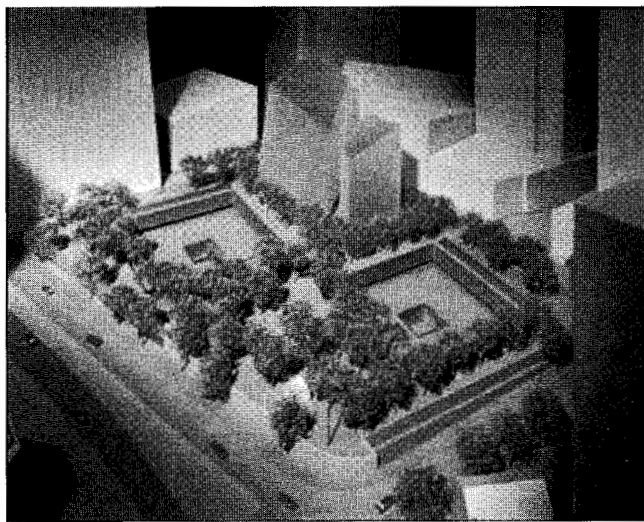


Figure 5. Tower footprints in World Trade Center Site Memorial *Reflecting Absence* (reproduced with permission, Lower Manhattan Development Corporation).

look at Ground Zero now is to see the footprint of that underground complex, from which any imprint of the towers has been erased.

Given that the concept of the "footprint" is unlikely to have emerged from people's personal experience with the World Trade Center complex prior to its destruction, one must ask how it has acquired such important symbolic meaning. The idea of a building's footprint evokes a sense that a structure is anchored in the ground. This concept was used in the design of the Oklahoma City National Memorial to designate the part of the memorial that pays tribute to the individuals who died there. The Oklahoma City memorial features bronze chairs, each inscribed with the name of one of the dead, that stand in rows within the area where the federal building once stood, and the foundation of the destroyed building was left exposed at the edges of this part of the site. Hence, the Oklahoma City memorial deliberately renders the land where the building stood and where people died a more meaningful place to mourn the dead than the surrounding area.

The fetishizing of the footprints of the two towers demonstrates a desire to situate the towers' absence within a recognizable tradition of memorial sites. The idea that a destroyed structure leaves a footprint evokes the site-specific concept of memory in modernity and the concrete materiality of ruins. In the case of Ground Zero, one could surmise that the desire to reimagine the towers as having left a footprint is, thus, a desire to imagine that the towers *left an imprint* on the ground. Their erasure from the skyline was so shocking and complete that there have been constant attempts to reassert them into the empty sky—in the images initially posted around the city that reinserted the towers into views from which they were now gone, in the proliferation of World Trade Center postcards, photos, and paraphernalia, and in the many proposals that the towers be rebuilt. The desire for the buildings to have had a footprint could thus be seen as a kind of working through of their absence.

Yet, ironically, the evoking of the footprints in Libeskind's plans and in Arad and Walker's memorial design means that they will have to be created out of the hole in the ground. Created, not re-created, given that, as I noted, they never actually existed in the ground. There is, in fact, a serious debate about whether or not commercial areas should be located under the footprints or if commercial development must occur around them (in other words, designating as sacred the space underneath the memorial, as well). Where will the dirt for this symbolic place come from? The dust and debris that filled it are now gone. Clearly, the dirt will not come from the Fresh Kills landfill. (Actually, soil excavated from the site to make way for the construction of the World Trade Center was used as landfill to create nearby Battery Park City.) In other words, the reconstruction necessary to re-create the footprints

would seem to render their status as a sacred space deeply ironic. There have already been several hairsplitting debates about whether or not the memorial footprints can fit exactly into the space where the tower structures stood, given the restrictions necessitated by infrastructure, such as transportation (Dunlap 2004b).⁴

Although the desire to see the footprints as sacred is part of a modern desire to attribute specific and concrete meanings to a part of the site of Ground Zero, they will be inevitably postmodern in their reconstruction. The desire to render them sacred, and to imagine them as demarcating the place where those who died still remain, is not unlike the desire to preserve the dust from the buildings. Each impulse provides a framework for thinking about the destruction of the towers in tangible, comforting forms. Through this reinscription and reconstruction of space, the unimaginable destruction and the arbitrary aspects of who lived, died, and suffered that day are placed within a framework of symbolic space as ordered meaning.

Architectures of grief

While they stood, the presence of the twin towers over lower Manhattan was overpowering. It was often remarked that they had created such a discrepancy in scale in relation to the other buildings in lower Manhattan that their construction had permanently altered the New York skyline. As a consequence, their absence has spoken more loudly, and with more resonance, than their presence ever could have. From the moment that the towers fell, there were calls that they be rebuilt—architects lined up before the news media to declare that they should be reconstructed, and politicians immediately claimed that to not rebuild them would be seen as a sign of weakness. The towers were imbued with a poignancy in their absence that would have been unimaginable while they stood untouched. Since September 11, there have been innumerable design proposals to rebuild the towers in some form (Lindgren 2003). Indeed, it was relatively late in the design decision process that their rebuilding was finally ruled out.

It is easy to think of this response as reflecting a kind of naïveté about architectural design, economics, and history. The World Trade Center towers were built at a time in architectural history when the modern skyscraper was fading from fashion—one could even argue that there had to be two towers, to compensate for their banal modernism. They were funded by public monies from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and were first imagined as providing office space for businesses concerned specifically with the port activity of New York harbor. Yet, by the time they were completed, the downtown market for office space was already oversaturated. The trade center represented an earlier, industrial model of urban planning, which called for businesses in the

transportation and financial industries to be densely located near each other in order to compete. By 2001, enabled by new technologies and postindustrialization, these same companies had regionalized, and office space in lower Manhattan had a high percentage of vacancies. Beyond these kinds of economic reasons, there are, of course, numerous psychological reasons why rebuilding the two towers would constitute a kind of folly, not the least of which would be the justifiable fears of potential tenants that such structures would inevitably be targets for future terrorism.

Although they will not be rebuilt, the towers continue to haunt New York City through the constant reassertions of their forms. On the six-month anniversary of September 11, two blue streams of light reached from near Ground Zero into the night sky. The *Tribute in Light* was envisioned by several artists and architects immediately after September 11 and was intended to pay tribute to the dead.⁵ But one could not help feeling that it was really the loss of the towers that the light memorial mourned. Just like the towers, it was designed to be seen from a distance, and its scale succeeded in overpowering the surrounding buildings. More surprisingly, in July 2002, when the *New Yorker* magazine asked a group of artists to reimagine the space, the artists produced a series of ironic, oddly humorous, ambivalent, and whimsical proposals that almost all replicated the towers in some form (Tomkins 2002). What was so remarkable about this project was how its avowed intention to use humor and cynicism to intervene in the hypersentimentalization of the site became, instead, an exercise in reimagining twin structures, two buildings, figures of two. Nancy Rubins inverted the towers with a proposal for two 110-story underground structures, and Art Spiegelman proposed 110 one-story buildings. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, who are well-known for their avant-garde work on issues of aesthetics and taste, produced a comical proposal for a farm on lower Manhattan, with the Cortland Street subway station surrounded by cows and fields. Yet, the two silos of the farm are unmistakable references to the two towers, hovering over the bucolic rendition like a shadow of the past.

Many of the proposals that have been put forward over the past two years by highbrow architects have also attempted to replicate the form of the twin towers in some fashion—for instance, strange forms suggestive of hollowed-out towers, or curving, twisted paired forms. That many of these designs have been taken seriously, and, for instance, been given the cultural imprimatur of such publications as the *New York Times* (which, at one point, took it upon itself to solicit a whole set of proposals, as if it were the city government) should prompt observers to see them as part of a kind of cultural working through rather than as indicators of innovations of architectural design. The design proposal that failed

most spectacularly on the sensitivity scale was Peter Eisenman's proposal for an office building complex that was designed to look as if it was in a state of perpetual collapse.⁶ The *New York Times* remarked of Eisenman's design, "The buildings would echo the devastation wrought on 9/11 and offer a striking memorial to the fallen towers; at the same time they would provide three million square feet of new office space" (Muschamp 2002: sect. 6, 53). This design was so strangely inappropriate, and so out of proportion to the grief and pain that surrounds Ground Zero, that I think it can only be read as an indicator of unprocessed aspects of grief. Indeed, one can read in the numerous designs proposed for the site an almost obsessive desire to fill it up, to imagine it as something other than it is, a wound in the cityscape. In the days after September 11, only architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio remarked on the power of the skyline's transformation as the most important and lasting message of the change produced by September 11: "Let's not build something that would mend the skyline, it is more powerful to leave it void. We believe it would be tragic to erase the erasure" (2001: 81).

The role of high-profile architects in reimagining lower Manhattan has been paralleled by a populist rethinking of the area, which has taken place not only through grassroots campaigns but also through various news outlets, such as CNN, which created public forums for people to submit their own designs. The debate about the site thus became framed for a period of time as one of elitism versus populism and of aesthetics versus mourning, in which architects were accused of subjecting a sacred site to an architectural "beauty contest." Leon Wieseltier, of the *New Republic*, declared in a debate with Libeskind that "there is something a little grotesque in the interpretation of ground zero as a lucky break for art. Lower Manhattan must not be transformed into a vast mausoleum, obviously, but neither must it be transformed into a theme park for advanced architectural taste" (Boxer 2002: B1). Wieseltier's views are echoed in many of the statements that have been made by the families of the dead, for whom any aesthetization of the site is in conflict with its sacred status as the final burial place of their loved ones. Here the words of Theodor Adorno are worth reiterating. When Adorno declared that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1981:34), he meant that cultural production was irrevocably changed in the wake of the Holocaust. His was a cautionary warning about the potential aesthetic pleasure afforded by such representations and about the subsequent narratives of redemption that they can provide. The debate over rebuilding Ground Zero is a reminder that, in moments of trauma, aesthetics almost always are understood as antithetical to processes of grief.

The degree to which his design will survive the complex negotiations over the ownership and rebuilding

of lower Manhattan is unclear, but Daniel Libeskind can be said to have won the design competition precisely because of his ability to negotiate this terrain fraught with aesthetics and mourning. In sharp contrast to the six proposals with which he competed, Libeskind presented his proposal, which was chosen in spring 2003, not as a reconstruction of lower Manhattan so much as a memorialization of the site. In fact, his proposal was named *Memory Foundations* (Figure 6). Libeskind initially left

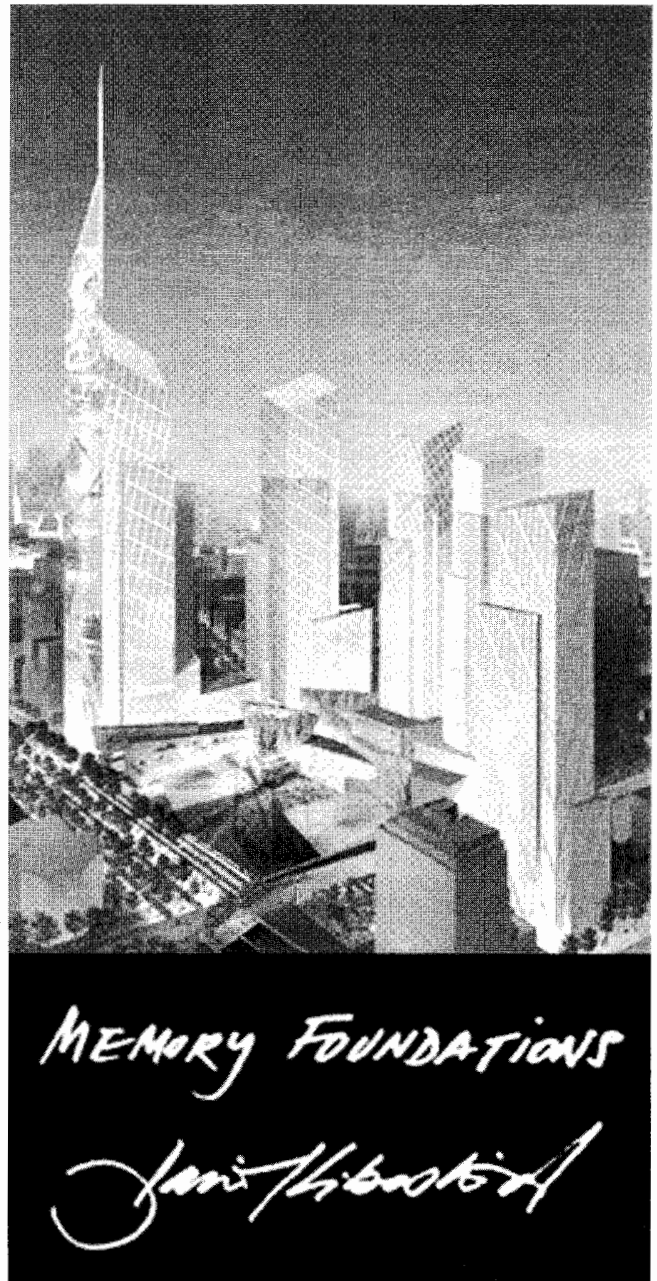


Figure 6. *Memory Foundations* design study by Daniel Libeskind (reproduced with permission, Lower Manhattan Development Corporation).

part of the slurry wall of the pit of Ground Zero exposed in his design, to pay tribute not only to the “bathtub structure” of the foundation of the trade center, which keeps the water of the Hudson River at bay, but also to the experience of Ground Zero itself. Not one to leave anything to the imagination, Libeskind has also given symbolic names to elements throughout the design, such as “The Park of Heroes,” “Edge of Hope,” and “Wedge of Light,” this last a triangular plaza where the sun will reach from 8:46 a.m. to 10:28 a.m. each year on September 11.

Libeskind’s triumph was to present himself not as an architect but as a mourning citizen, and this presentation resonated not only with the families of the dead but also with the public at large. He was the sole architect in the competition who wrote autobiographically when presenting his design. Libeskind, who was born in Poland, grew up mostly in New York, and at the time of the competition had lived for 15 years in Berlin (he has now moved back to New York), presented himself as an intensely patriotic New Yorker: “I arrived by ship to New York as a teenager, an immigrant like millions of others before me, my first sign was the Statue of Liberty and the amazing skyline of Manhattan. I have never forgotten that sight or what it stands for. That is what this project is about.” It is important to note that although Libeskind has knowingly deployed the narrative of the immigrant to great effect, his particular immigrant narrative serves to screen over other such stories. Libeskind is the grateful refugee, the immigrant who has even greater patriotism than those who preceded him. Indeed, the piece de resistance of his design, which has been much fought over, is his “Tower of Freedom,” which at 1,776 feet will be, nominally, the “tallest building in the world” (depending on what standard one uses) and is intended to echo the Statue of Liberty across New York Harbor. Some see the building’s height as a defiant response to terrorism, others as a crafty way to prevent the World Trade Center developers from reducing the tower’s expensive size. Libeskind’s immigrant persona thus overpowers other immigrant stories that have circulated around September 11—of undocumented workers at the Windows on the World restaurant, whose families in Mexico did not even know the name of the place where they worked, and of the eager, young, first generations who worked as traders in the scrappy, low-level financial firms placed on the higher floors of the towers.

Libeskind, who has a charismatic larger-than-life quality, thus evokes a set of historical meanings as a culture figure—a Jewish refugee, a patriotic immigrant, and, not least, as the architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, one of the primary interpreters of Jewish history and cultural memory. Libeskind’s presence in the process of rebuilding Manhattan has thus been coded as a redemptive one. Indeed, having been forced to work with

Silverstein’s architect, David Childs, and having already compromised on many design elements, Libeskind is often depicted as the aesthetic visionary at war with the crass commercial interests of real estate developers. Nevertheless, his proposal was at the center of an aesthetic controversy before it was chosen. *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp wrote a now-notorious attack on the design, condemning it as “astonishingly tasteless” and “emotionally manipulative,” a design that was bland and smacked of “kitsch” (2003: E1). The debate about the aesthetics of memory is not likely to fade easily as the reconstruction process moves forward. At its heart is a highly contested issue: To whom does the site of Ground Zero belong—to the city, the Port Authority, the developers, the families of the dead, the architects who reenvision it, the tourists, the media, or the nation?

The rush to memorialization

The events of September 11 took place at a time in U.S. history that is characterized by a preoccupation, one might even say, an obsession, with memorialization. A huge number of memorials have been built during the last two decades, some of them related to conflicts long passed and others built quickly to commemorate contemporary events. The Oklahoma City National Memorial was built in the record time of five years. It seemed as if the urge to speak about a memorial in New York was almost instantaneous—by the next day, even as the names and number of the dead remained unknown, there was discussion of a memorial. In some ways, immediate discussion of a memorial allowed people to begin to construct narratives of redemption and to feel as if the horrid event itself was over—containable, already a memory. Yet the rush to memorialize will have a profound impact on the way in which lower Manhattan is rebuilt, on the kind of neighborhood and commercial district it becomes, and on the ways in which the meaning of September 11 is inscribed within the history of the United States and within the landscape of New York City. In this impatient atmosphere, the real debate over what it means to mourn cannot take place.

Under significant pressure from the victims’ families, New York politicians, and the rapidly proceeding commercial redevelopment of the site, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation ran a memorial contest, which began less than two years after September 11 and that resulted in the awarding of the commission to architects Michael Arad and Peter Walker in January 2004. In many ways, any memorial design had already been usurped by Libeskind’s master plan for the site, with its discourse of memorialization and its framing of the footprints as the memorial’s location. In addition, the design contest produced a debate (much of it taking place in the pages of the

New York Times) about populism versus elitism and the politics of mourning.

The memorial competition was an open contest in which over 5,000 entries were submitted from around the world. In November 2003, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation placed the design proposals of eight finalists on display in lower Manhattan, where they were subject to public debate and significant criticism. Most observers felt that the eight proposals were unexceptional, minimalist, timid designs that looked more appropriate for a corporate plaza than a memorial. The contestants had been encouraged to "convey historic authenticity" by including "surviving original elements," although none of the finalists did so. There were numerous calls for the competition to be scrapped and started over and for the city to abandon its pose of populism and to commission a design from a well-known architect. For instance, *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman condemned the finalists' designs in an elitist polemic, asking, "Does anybody today care that the pope did not hold an open competition for the Sistine ceiling?" (2003: sect. 2, 1).⁷ Kimmelman advocated that the city commission a design from a well-known architect. For others, the primary concern was the dominance of modernist minimalism in the designs, which was perceived as signaling a rejection of representation and was attributed widely to the presence of architect Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, on the jury. Although the jury included a contingent of political appointees and representatives from the victims' families, many artists and curators were also members. Lin was hardly the sole representative of modernist aesthetics, although she was the best known outside of art circles.⁸ Ironically, the New York debate has repeated practically word for word the debates that took place over Lin's now-iconic Washington, DC, memorial, which resulted in the construction of two representational Vietnam memorials in addition to Lin's minimalist wall of names (Sturken 1997).

As in that earlier debate, the dominance of modernist tendencies in the September 11 designs was understood as a rejection of codes of heroism and as an embrace of an antimonument style (Leigh 2003). For instance, Dennis Smith, a former firefighter who wrote a book about the recovery effort (*Report from Ground Zero*, 2002), noted that in the finalists' designs, "the universal elements—air, water, earth and light—are celebrated. Nature is celebrated. Nowhere is there a representation of a human being" (2003: A29). Yet, if anything, the debate over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial demonstrated vividly the problematic aspects of figural representation as a means to mourn the dead, because each figural statue raised issues of exclusion. In fact, a similar controversy was reenacted around a statue designed to replicate the now-famous photograph of three firefighters erecting a flag at Ground Zero. When

the sculptor proposed to make the three figures white, black, and Latino, rather than depicting the three white men in the photograph, the design was rejected as expressing a form of political correctness (Flynn 2002).

Inevitably, this debate reenacts traditional concepts of high and low culture and taste, in which high art is equated with modernism and figural representation with the masses. Reportedly, the jurors were astonished by what they considered to be the "tastelessness" of some of the entries (Collins and Dunlap 2004a), all of which are now posted on the Web (www.wtcsitememorial.org) and some of which have since been subjected to public derision. The designs include an oversized question mark, two airplanes in a park, and a glowing apple on top of a spire (Dunlap 2004a).

The estimated cost of realizing the final design, *Reflecting Absence*, is an extraordinary \$350 million (not including an additional \$175 million to build its "platform," which will be 70 feet above the site's foundations as a means of preventing commercial space beneath it; Collins and Dunlap 2004b). The design consists of an open plaza with trees into which two "voids" with reflecting pools dip down into the space of the towers' footprints. Visitors will be able to walk down ramps to contemplative memorial spaces below the voids (Figure 7). The names of the victims will be arranged "in no particular order," according to the designers, around the pools, although, at least, at present, plans call for those who worked for "uniformed services" to be designated by individual shields (Collins and Dunlap 2004b).⁹

Emptiness, in the form of contemplative spaces and voids, is a primary aesthetic of the memorial design. Thus, although intended as a memorial to the people who died, its aesthetic of absence seems primarily to evoke the absence of the towers. Much of the criticism of the design has fixed on this quality, calling it "void of honor, truth, emotion and dignity" (Molinaro 2004: A18). The widow of one September 11 victim wrote to the *New York Times* that "'Reflecting Absence' is an appropriate name for this design. It truly represents absence—the absence of any reminder of what it is supposed to memorialize!" (Gabrielle 2004: A32). The voids that demarcate the footprints of the towers in the memorial design replay the presence-absence of the twin towers. One could argue that the desire to rebuild the towers and the designation of voids where the towers once stood are essentially the same.

It is difficult to predict in advance whether or not the Arad-Walker memorial will work—it may be that it will succeed in providing a contemplative space that will allow for a broad set of practices by the people who visit the site. But the vast area that has been given over to the memorial (a decision that preceded the design) indicates in many ways a failure to reimagine the space of Ground Zero. The huge area of the memorial design, encompassing the two

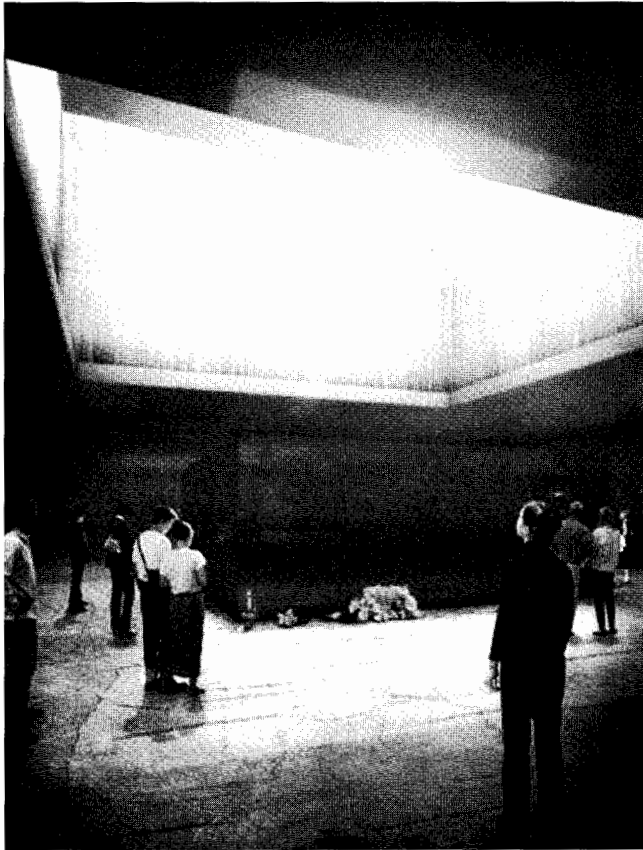


Figure 7. Interior space in World Trade Center Site Memorial *Reflecting Absence* (reproduced with permission, Lower Manhattan Development Corporation).

footprints as well as the space around them, and the plans for a memorial center at the site dictate that it will be a place ruled by memory rather than a vital, rebuilt neighborhood that incorporates a space for mourning and reflection. Some of the most effective memorials and tributes to loss have been small and contained (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to over 57,000 dead is tiny compared to the September 11 memorial design). The politics of remapping Ground Zero meant that the relative size of the area dedicated to the memory of September 11 was highly politicized from the start. Yet, because of the power given to commercial interests in the redevelopment, it may only be through this designation of space as memory that there will be public areas in the rebuilt Ground Zero.

Ultimately, the recoding of the space of Ground Zero is about the ways that the events of September 11 will be experienced as a moment of U.S. history and as such, it is also a project of pedagogy. The space is now marked permanently as a site of tourism (indeed, some of the redesigns of the site have tried to take into account the estimates that there will be over 150 tourist buses coming

to the site every day), where particular concepts of the city and the nation will be produced, performed, and sold. The memorial will play a key role in this production of meaning, as will the now-planned memorial center. Charles Griswold has called memorials a “species of pedagogy” (1986:689), in that they construct narratives about the past and how it should be understood. It is important to note, however, that memorials are essentially ineffective as forms of political pedagogy. They pay tribute to the dead, but they cannot speak in more than simple terms to the complexity of history. This poses what Geoffrey White has called “the tension between honoring the dead and educating” (this issue). Here, again, Oklahoma City forms a powerful precedent. The Memorial Center at the Oklahoma City National Memorial is notable for its failure to address and adequately explain the political context that resulted in the bombing that killed the victims there—precisely because any discussion of why the bombing took place was perceived as giving voice to its perpetrators. One can only imagine how this will be enacted in a memorial center at Ground Zero.

One of the most ironic aspects of the rebuilding, recoding, and reconstruction of Ground Zero is the transformation it represents from the 1960s visions of a World Trade Center, which displayed an idealized view of cosmopolitanism and an optimism about the future, to the patriotic and, ultimately, provincial discourses that increasingly define present-day New York City as a place wounded and defended, a place that looks backward toward its moment of trauma, a place ruled by memories of the past.

Notes

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1. According to Michael Tomasky, the first use of the term in print was by Associated Press reporter Larry McShane, who, on the evening of September 11, 2001, wrote, “Shortly after 7 PM, crews began heading into ground zero of the terrorist attack to search for survivors and recover bodies” (2003: 18).

2. The name Fresh Kills, which has the potential to sound morbid in this context, is actually derived from the Dutch language, in which *kills* means “streams.” Many names in New York come from its early Dutch settlers.

3. The center of this controversy was Langewiesche’s claim, which he modified in the paperback version of his book, that firefighters participated in widespread looting, in particular, his repetition without attribution of a story that a fire truck buried in the rubble was found filled with stacks of blue jeans, implying that firefighters were looting before the buildings actually fell (Carr 2003; Noah 2002; Tomasky 2003: 20–22). Langewiesche could have mediated this claim better, as it seems likely from the subsequent debate that the clothing was blown out of a storefront and into the empty truck. Evidence of the vitriolic nature of this debate can be seen on the website

www.wtclivinghistory.org, most of which is dedicated to discrediting Langewiesche.

4. A February 2004 *New York Times* article demonstrates the degree to which this discourse is so ensconced that it seems unquestionable. The *Times* reporter quotes several members of the jury and several members of families of the dead who were all outraged that the dimensions of the memorial might not exactly replicate the footprints. One individual asserted, "To do any less, I think, would not be telling the story. People who come years from now will have no idea what the original dimensions were" (Dunlap 2004b: A31).

5. The project was begun immediately after September 11 by two architects, John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi, and two artists, Paul Myoda and Julian LaVerdiere. They were later joined by architect Richard Nash Gould and lighting designer Paul Marantz. The display was produced by the Municipal Art Society and Creative Time. See www.creativetime.org/towers/main.html.

6. This design seems even more ironic because Eisenman is the designer of the very interesting Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which will open this year.

7. His article was reportedly considered to be "smug cultural superiority" by some jurors (Kimmelman 2004: sect. 2, 1).

8. Other jury members were Paula Grant Berry, a businesswoman and widow of victim David Berry; Susan Freedman, president of the Public Art Fund; Patricia Harris, deputy mayor of New York; Michael McKeon, former director of communications for Governor George Pataki; Julie Menin, an attorney and resident of lower Manhattan and founder of Wall Street Rising; architect Enrique Norten; artist Martin Puryear; Nancy Rosen, a curator of public art; Lowery Stokes Sims, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Michael Van Valkenburgh; and James Young, professor and chair of the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and specialist in Holocaust memorials. David Rockefeller served as an honorary member, and Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation and former president of Brown University, was the chair.

9. Full descriptions and images of the memorial can be found at www.renewnyc.com.

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