



Exhibiting 9/11: Interpreting Archaeology and Memory at the World Trade Center Site

by Ian Kerrigan

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Working for the 9/11 Memorial Museum currently under construction and not yet open to the general public, I often field inquiries regarding the location of the Museum. When I respond that the Museum is being built at the World Trade Center site in New York, typical follow up questions include: *Isn't that site being dedicated as a memorial?; How can you build a museum at ground zero?; or How do you create an exhibition on 9/11 so soon after the event at that place?* To build the 9/11 Memorial Museum at any other place than the authentic site of the terrorist attacks sounds nonsensical to me, but then I remember that not all national memorial museums in the U.S. are located on the actual site of a tragedy. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. is situated thousands of miles from where the atrocities took place in Europe. The Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum locates the outdoor symbolic memorial on the site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building where the bomb detonated, while the Museum is located in an adjacent building that sustained collateral damage. Distance from the authentic site, or separation of an onsite memorial from an offsite or near-site museum is a condition for several memorial museums in this country.

Being located at the World Trade Center site was a founding principle for the 9/11 Memorial Museum. An archaeological framework of recovered artifacts, excavation, and the ability for museum visitors to encounter the cavity in which the World Trade Center used to stand, allows the exhibition development team—architects Aedas and Snøhetta,

lead exhibit designer Thinc Design with media designer Local Projects, historical exhibition designer Layman Design, and Museum staff—to reveal a palimpsest of interpretation of what was physically here, what remains, and what was lost. Arrays of dynamic media will further allow visitors to insert their own memories into the exhibitions for future audiences to encounter, at once engaging in tribute and historical storytelling themselves.

9/11 Memorial and Museum

Opening for the 10th anniversary on September 11, 2011, the 9/11 Memorial is a tree-filled plaza covering eight of the original 16 acres of the World Trade Center site. The design consists of two pools, each nearly an acre in size, set within the original footprints of the Twin Towers. The 2,977 names of those killed in the 9/11 attacks in New York, at the Pentagon, and on Flight 93—as well as the six victims of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing—are inscribed into bronze panels surrounding the pools. Thirty-foot waterfalls cascade down the sides of both pools, as the water disappears into deeper voids in the pools' centers. The 9/11 Memorial Museum will open one year later in 2012. Occupying 110,000 square feet of exhibition space, the Museum preserves the archaeological character of the World Trade Center site, and will feature extensive exhibition areas near the original bedrock foundation of the Twin Towers, seven stories below the Memorial plaza.

Memorial Museum as Archaeological Site

Perceiving the World Trade Center site as an archaeological site has been a

fundamental strategy in developing the exhibitions at the 9/11 Memorial Museum. The World Trade Center complex was dominated by its iconic Twin Towers, soaring over a quarter-mile into the sky, occupying over 10 million square feet of rentable office, retail and restaurant space, and serving as a major transit hub for lower Manhattan. The towers' collapse on 9/11 created a pile of 1.8 million tons of material that had to be safely excavated and removed, and carefully searched and sifted for any human remains and identifiable personal or building property. A process lasting nine months, the cleanup operations left at its conclusion an empty pit with several architectural features remaining in situ, and a host of recovered objects that could one day be displayed as museum artifacts.

The Museum includes a historical exhibition that explores the events that took place on 9/11, its antecedents including the 1993 bombing at the World Trade Center, and its aftermath leading up to present day. The public spaces between the historical exhibition and other enclosed galleries are areas in which the exhibition development team has interpreted archaeological remnants and repatriated large-scale objects to give visitors an overall sense of the events that occurred at this site. In many ways, the museum journey is conceived of as a giant archaeological walking tour. Walking tours have long figured out the power of place, bringing visitors to distinct spots where historical events unfolded and declaring *this happened here*. This approach has valuable exhibition potential.



Entrance pavilion and memorial pools at the 9/11 Memorial, set to open on September 11, 2011 for the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks. Rendering by Squared Design Lab.

Artifact Repatriation

Repatriated to the site and installed in the Museum's public spaces are artifacts such as large pieces of recovered steel from the Twin Towers, a segment of the North Tower broadcast antenna, an elevator motor that carried passengers up and down the 110 stories of the Twin Towers, and a fire engine destroyed in the collapse of the towers belonging to a company of firefighters who lost 11 members on 9/11. These objects are literally the remains of the day. Removed from the World Trade Center site during cleanup operations and installed in the Museum's public spaces, they are transformed into artifacts attesting to the scale of devastation and loss. The exhibition team envisioned the presentation of these exhibits as a modern-day passage leading to an archaeological site such as the Roman Forum, in which fallen capitals and broken lintels are replaced with steel building parts and emergency response vehicles, as ruins and testaments to the events they had once witnessed.

Our goal in placing exhibition material in these public spaces was twofold: create additional content opportunities that directly connect visitors to this particular site, and provide a rich experience for visitors who may not enter the core historical exhibition. We recognize that for some visitors, re-encountering

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Visitors begin their archaeological journey in the Museum's entrance pavilion atrium with two recovered over 80-foot sections of "tridents," original steel columns that formed the bases of the Twin Towers. Rendering by Squared Design Lab.

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the events of the day in an historical exhibition narrative may be overwhelming and emotionally exhausting, and some may be motivated to come to the Museum wholly to bear witness to the site and appreciate what was once here and what was lost.

Excavation and Preservation

As visitors travel to the northern and southern perimeters of the museum space at bedrock, excavations of the Twin Towers' structural columns remain exposed, revealing a series of box columns set within a concrete base atop a covered bedrock layer of Manhattan schist. During cleanup operations following 9/11,

recovery workers sheared these columns to the buildings' foundation level. Some 9/11 family members collaborated with landmark preservationists to advocate for keeping these historic remnants as part of the redeveloped World Trade Center site. To ensure these in situ historic assets are meaningfully accessible, our team decided not only to interpret the truncated columns, but also to install an exhibition on the construction of the World Trade Center and the "life of the towers." Visitors get an exhibition that describes the archaeological remnants in front of them, but also contextualizes them in a larger story about the World Trade Center, its inception, and life here in lower Manhattan. A review conducted in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 also identified other historic resources to be protected and made available to the public in the Museum.

Museum as Artifact

But by and large, the Museum's primary artifact is the site in and of itself. We allow visitors to walk around it above ground on the Memorial plaza, move through it as they make their descent to the exhibition galleries at bedrock, and observe its remaining architectural features and recovered relics on display. The name of the above ground Memorial design is *Reflecting Absence*, emphasizing the absence of those who were killed on 9/11 in the visible absence of the vertical towers, and through the voids of the memorial pools set within the footprints of where they once stood. This theme is transformed by the archaeology of the public spaces of the Museum below ground, where this absence becomes a curated exhibition experience. Here,



Large artifacts, including a segment of the antenna from the North Tower of the World Trade Center, lie in repose in the public spaces of the Museum. Rendering by Thinc Design with Local Projects.

visitors engage with the objects and stories that fill the hollow space that remained after the towers' collapse and cleanup, underscoring the monumental scale of the World Trade Center and the loss of nearly 3,000 people who were killed in the attacks.

Media as Portals to Memory

The physical archaeology of the site presented in the exhibition spaces is aided by an array of archival and dynamic media presentations that allow visitors to dig into their own personal memory trenches. Occurring at the cusp of the digital age, 9/11 was the most documented breaking news story up to that date (Friend, 2006a). Television and radio stations broadcast imagery of the unfolding attacks and aftermath. Professional and amateur photographers and videographers captured photos and footage from all angles. Phone calls, voicemails, and aviation and emergency responder transmissions were recorded and later transcribed. These archival

media sources provide rich resources for the exhibitions, which allow those who witnessed the events first hand to share their stories and documentation, at once reinforcing the message that these events happened here, as well as allowing first person accounts to carry the narrative in lieu of a traditional museum voice, whenever possible. Exhibition labels will follow suit, employing excerpted quotations from archival sources and oral history accounts to provide additional insight and context to objects.

Creating an exhibition only a decade after 9/11 means that most visitors will come with their own memories of these events. It is estimated that one third of the world's population witnessed the events of 9/11 on television, internet, circulated still images, or radio over the course of that day (Friend, 2006b). The Museum honors these memories that visitors carry with them at the very onset of the introductory exhibition experience, which brings visitors from the lobby down to bedrock

Many of the dynamic media pieces are being developed to allow Museum staff to incorporate visitor recordings directly into the media, so that future audiences will be hearing the voices of past visitors.



Excavated structural columns at the southern perimeter of the Museum, surrounded by an exhibition on the construction of the World Trade Center. Rendering by Thinc Design with Local Projects.



At the start of the exhibition experience, visitors pass through a soundscape of past visitor voices from around the world remembering where they were on 9/11. Rendering by Thinc Design with Local Projects.

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References:

Friend, David. (2006a). *Watching the world change: The stories behind the images of 9/11*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Friend, David. (2006b). The man in the window. *Vanity Fair*, September 2006.

level. Visitors pass through a soundscape of voices from around the world, remembering where they were on 9/11 and how they first heard about the attacks.

These and other dynamic media pieces have been stitched together using oral histories, and recorded remembrances of victims. When the Museum opens, visitors will be able to share their own memories of 9/11, remembrances of victims, and thoughts about the continuing legacy of these events in onsite recording booths. Many of the dynamic media pieces are being developed to allow Museum staff to incorporate visitor recordings directly into the media, so that future audiences will be hearing the voices of past visitors. The visitor thus has the opportunity to engage in a reflective tribute activity, while simultaneously becoming part of the telling of 9/11 history. In this way, the exhibitions become about collective history, highlighting the notion that the Museum is made up of donations from people who experienced these events.

Conclusion

Memorial museums possess the dual responsibility of historical education and commemoration. For the 9/11 Memorial Museum, this translates to the mission of bearing witness to the events of September 11, 2001 and February 26, 1993, and honoring the memories of those who were killed. Yet the task of creating an exhibition on the theme of 9/11 that provides both historical narrative and gestures of tribute proves challenging in a time when the event occurred only a decade ago: the aftermath and legacy of 9/11 is ongoing, and public and personal emotions surrounding the event are still evolving. Locating the gallery spaces below the Memorial at the bedrock foundations of the original Twin Towers of the World Trade Center allowed our exhibition development team to tell this story here at this time. Harnessing the power of place, the exhibitions will enable visitors to encounter and connect with the authentic site of tragedy, honor the archaeology of the space, commemorate those who were lost in the attacks, and contribute their own memories to the creation of history. ✨