

AMERICA

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Double Tragedy

The new World Trade Center memorial erases virtually all traces of the old buildings.

A few days after the National September 11 Memorial opened to the public, I arrived with a printout of my online reservation and a photo ID in hand and joined a well-organized, orderly series of queues at the corner of Greenwich and Albany Streets, just south of the World Trade Center site. Visitors are admitted in clusters, instructed to keep passes visible at all times, and herded along a meandering approach, winding through the great construction project, through an airport-style security checkpoint, and past deep holes full of roaring machinery, into an eight-acre plaza planted with young, skinny white oaks.

When I set foot on the WTC site for the first time since... well, since it became a "site," I was excited to be there. I was amazed to find myself standing in what felt like an oasis, a generous swath of open space in the middle of a new and completely unrecognizable part of town.

To the northwest was the banal behemoth now known as 1 WTC, to the southeast, a not terribly inspiring Fumihiko Maki tower that was quickly rising to 72 stories, and smack in the middle, the angular breadbox that is Snøhetta's entry pavilion to the memorial museum, which won't open until next year. Enveloped by the ambient roar of construction, looking all around, I felt like I was in some other city. I was reminded of a 1998 visit to Berlin, when the new Potsdamer Platz opened. Master planned by Renzo Piano and Christoph Kohlbecker, this cluster of edgy new buildings went up all at once in what had been the pre-WWII heart of Berlin, long a vacant lot. "Coming out of CinemaxX, I didn't think I was in Berlin," Uwe Rada, a local journalist, told me at the time. Now, more than a decade later, I know how he felt.

I remember scrutinizing the eight final designs, selected from 5,201 entries in the memorial competition, back in November 2003. None of them came close to having the requisite emotional heft. At that point, the one cogent idea about the memorial had come from the master planner, Daniel Libeskind. He invoked as a metaphor **continued on page 34**

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This is the only tree that survived the attacks. Just prior to being returned to the site, it was struck by lightning and had to be nurtured back to life again.



the survival of the slurry wall, the piece of underground infrastructure that was built to keep the Hudson River out of the WTC's original excavation. In Libeskind's renderings, the memorial was set below grade, a green space sheltered by the rough contours of the slurry wall. That idea got tossed out early on. The concept of a sunken memorial struck local residents as too bleak, and the slurry wall would have been more difficult to preserve if exposed to the elements. But the real issue, I think, was that the raw-looking wall would have made the site less appealing to commercial tenants.

I attended the ceremony at Federal Hall on Wall Street in early 2004 at which the competition winner, the young Israeli-American architect Michael Arad, was introduced. And while I'd been religiously attending such events for over a year, I remember that as the moment when I started tuning out. Actually, I liked some of what Arad brought to the table; his key gesture was an elaboration on the towers' footprints. I also liked that visitors would be able to walk down into those footprints, to some 30 feet below street level. Arad's renderings made the space under his waterfalls look meditative and cool. But I found myself unable to devote any attention to the ongoing strife over the design of the way-over-budget memorial, the proper placement and grouping of the victims' names, and the mechanics of the waterfalls. I even failed to notice when the underground portion of Arad's scheme got value-engineered out of existence.

As a result, I walked into the memorial in September with few preconceptions. I knew only that there would be footprints, names, and waterfalls. Indeed, the main features are the two massive square

fountains, each the size of one of the footprints. At roughly waist height, an angled ribbon of bronze runs along each edge of the squares. The names of 9/11 victims are cut deeply into the metal and arranged so that those who worked together or died together are clustered. The cantilevered panels are held in place by concealed bronze supports, which reach up and out from a basin of still-looking water that drains into the spectacular falls. (Best thing about all the water: it drowns out

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the sound of construction.) The overall look is weighty and somber, as is appropriate, but in all the heaviness there is no detectable nod to the more graceful aesthetic of the buildings that once filled those cherished footprints.

And this is the problem for me. My sense of loss over the Twin Towers has not been so acute since I flew into Newark from Sweden, where I was on 9/11, and saw for myself the lingering cloud of smoke on the skyline where the towers once stood. This plaza, with its carefully positioned rows of young trees, and the heavy armature supporting the names and surrounding the footprints, makes me miss the old place: the windswept plaza, the two gargantuan towers, **continued on page 36**

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the uncompromising architecture. As seen from the memorial, the new World Trade Center, emerging all around me, looked exactly like what it is: a collection of compromises.

Perhaps because the rebuilding of the center of Berlin was a clear precursor to what's happened at Ground Zero, I was also reminded of someone else I'd met there, Hans Stimmann, Berlin's former building director. He oversaw the 1990s reconstruction of Friedrichstrasse, once Berlin's finest shopping street, and compelled architects like Jean Nouvel, Peter Eisenman, and Richard Meier to fit their designs into the street's historic-building envelope. At the time, the architectural community, myself included, regarded him as a villain. When I interviewed Stimmann, he said, "The planners destroyed Berlin, not the bombs." For the first time ever, sitting in this new plaza, I had insight into Stimmann's point of view.

I'm not saying we should have rebuilt the World Trade Center as it was. I doubt that particular building envelope will ever be reused. However, it seems clear that part of Lower Manhattan—pre-9/11—was far more powerful than its replacement. While I sincerely hope that those who lost someone on 9/11—when they visit the memorial to wedge flowers or coins into the deeply cut contours of a friend or relative's name—will feel that it's an appropriate and comforting place to mourn, I wonder what's there for those who were not as directly affected by the attacks. What consolation does the memorial offer those who mourn the destruction of the World Trade Center itself, who grieve not for any one individual but for a part of our city, and for the more innocent,

less relentlessly monitored world we lived in prior to that day? So far, the memorial doesn't offer much for that other kind of mourner. Instead, it's a confirmation of how completely the old World Trade Center—and its era—have vanished.

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This is largely because what is missing from the memorial, at grade, is any acknowledgment of or allusion to that lost place. What's left of the old World Trade Center will only be accessible when the museum opens next year. The underground portion of the museum rests in the old WTC's foundations and includes an overlook where you will be able to see the slurry wall that Libeskind had positioned at the heart of his plan. Just inside the entry pavilion, you'll see a couple of the towers' original trident-shaped steel columns. They are, in fact, in place right now. I saw memorial visitors pressing their faces up against the glass and peering in at them, eager to see something real.

Maybe it's appropriate that we'll have to descend into the catacombs to see what little is left of the late World Trade Center. But it compounds the tragedy that all traces of what happened there have been erased from the aboveground city, where all will soon be business as usual. ■



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