

The 9/11 Memorial: Healing, Preserving, & Honoring

Halley Douglas

Before even beginning this essay, I think it is extremely important to acknowledge the horror, pain, and immense devastation that the events of September 11th, 2001 have inflicted on every victim, their families, and our country as a whole. This paper seeks to honor the 2,996 people who died in the events of 9/11 and in the time since due to injuries sustained from the events, as well as the hundreds of first responders and thousands of civilians who helped with recovery and clean up. I thank you all.

It is also important to note that I was born in November of 2000. I was not even one year old when 9/11 happened. Everything written will be coming from the perspective of someone who was not present or even remembers this day. That is a privilege that I have, and I want to honor that most do not. I have had the honor of visiting the 9/11 memorial and some of the analysis will be from personal experience there. With that said, this essay will explore how the design of the 9/11 memorial impacts how we remember and honor that day over twenty years later.

How do we handle mass trauma? How can we ever wrap our heads around all the loss and grief associated with such a massive event? How does a country heal from an attack on its very values and core? Memorials are also a public attempt to answer those questions. They have sought to offer solace to visitors and honor those who were impacted by events for hundreds of years. By giving people a place to visit to grieve, honor, remember, and learn about a mass trauma, we can start to heal. The 9/11 Memorial is the modern steward of a memorial dedicated to these very things. The design of memorials using nature and storytelling can help us heal, preserve, and honor even such a tragic event as 9/11, even for visitors who were not alive or remember the event itself.

Shortly following 9/11, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation was assigned to manage the restoration of the area around the World Trade Center (WTC). The idea for a memorial directly on the site of the World Trade Center was quickly developed, and a massive design competition was launched in 2003. The goal was to create a “place of remembrance and contemplation within the bustle of Lower Manhattan.”¹ Anyone over the age of eighteen and from any country could contribute to the competition. In the end, there were over 5,000 submissions from sixty-three countries.² A thirteen-member jury was appointed by the Lower Manhattan Dev. Corp. to choose the design for the memorial. They were looking for designs that “honored the victims, spoke to the needs of the families who had lost loved ones, and provided a space for healing and reflection.”³ The winner was chosen and announced to the public in January of 2004.

Architect Michael Arad’s vision of “Reflecting Absence” was chosen as the winner. The landscape architecture firm PWP, led by Peter Walker, was brought in to assist in the design as well. The base idea was twin waterfall pools surrounded by bronze stands that listed the names of all the victims of the 9/11 attacks and included the victims of the 1993 bombing at

¹ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

the World Trade Center. These pools would sit within a plaza that held over 400 trees. Arad says he designed the area to be a large public gathering space to reflect how our country and the city of New York came together following the attacks.⁴

The design would go through many rounds of revision before it even began construction. PWP's task was to help "humanize" the scale of the design while continuing to keep it somewhat abstract.⁵ This decision was a response to the outcry of many New Yorkers following the announcement of the winning design. In an article published in the New York Times in 2004, the writer describes the public's "discomfort with the starkness" of the design and how much the actual events were front and center.⁶ The emotional focus of the design understandably made people wary. The article continues to describe that there was still lots of hope that the final design would show improvement and include more nature and less of a stark open plaza.⁷ This desire to include more nature reflects humanity's current view of nature as healing and calming, especially when compared to the loud bustling New York City backdrop. After final approval by the board, the 9/11 Memorial, including the redevelopment of the whole area around the WTC and the Memorial Museum, began construction in March of 2006.

Because of the emotional and physical scale of this memorial, it was clear that every single design decision had to be made with thoughtful consideration. The design can be broken down into four categories: the pools, the names, the tree grove, and the Survivor Tree. The newest addition of the Memorial Glade will be discussed further down. Each part was curated with the utmost thought for the families, the victims, and for the visitors. In her book examining how trauma is curated at the 9/11 Memorial, Jaque Micieli-Voutsinas discusses how the sensory and emotional experiences in a place like this must be taken into consideration over the visual and passive experiences.⁸ The stories told here pose a difficult task because so many visitors have different associations with the events. Every person who walks through this memorial will experience the material space in a specific way that will impact the message they receive.⁹ Micieli-Voutsinas puts it very well in that each design aspect makes you ask "Who am I within this history?"¹⁰

The two pools are the highlight of the design. These two almost acre size pools sit in the footprints of the former North and South Towers of the World Trade Center. The pools were designed by Dan Euser, who often worked with PWP. The pools contain the two largest manmade waterfalls in North America with two tiers each. The first tier falls 30 feet into a basin then the second another 20 feet into a smaller void in the center of the pool. There are many interpretations of the voids and the pools themselves. The architect says that the pools "represent absence made visible" while Micieli-Voutsinas discusses how the large voids are more representative of the wounds created by the events of 9/11. Both understandings

⁴ 911groundzero.com

⁵ www.pwpla.com

⁶ go-gale-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ www-taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

emphasize how the design plays into the extreme loss of not only the physical buildings but the thousands of people who died on that day in that very location.¹¹ The decision to place these falls literally on top of where the buildings once stood pushes the storyline of putting visitors into the scene and greatly heightens the experience while there.

The next design feature is the names of those who died, which are etched into bronze parapets surrounding the two pools. As stated before, over 2900 people were killed during the attacks at the World Trade Center, on the four hijacked flights, first responders, and the 1993 bombing. Every single name is present at the memorial. The intricacy of the process and placement of all the victims speaks to the thought and weight of the design even down to this little detail. The names are grouped by the location or circumstance in which they passed in.

The North Tower Pool contains the names of those killed in the North Tower, on Flight 11, and in the 1993 bombing. The South Tower Pool has the names of those killed in the South Tower, first responders, on flights 175, 77 and 93. To further honor the victims, next of kin were asked by the designers if they wanted their loved ones placed next to anyone specific. This resulted in friends and colleagues, all the crews of the flights, and first responders units and groups all being adjacent to each other.¹² In a short video about the making of the memorial, a mother of a victim tearfully talks about how meaningful it is to see her son's name next to the name of his best friend.¹³ This emotional story emphasizes how much thoughtful design matters, especially in memorial design.

The next section of the Memorial is the tree grove that makes up the surrounding plaza. Over 400 White Oak trees were planted. This plant was chosen not only because it is hardy and resilient, like the people of New York City, but it also is native to all three areas of the events of 9/11 (New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania).¹⁴ The trees create an urban forest which buffers the emotional memorial from the bustling New York environment. This helps create a transition space both into and out of the memorial as visitors grapple with what they experienced within the memorial and go back to normal life.¹⁵ Another amazing design detail is that the trees create arches along pathways which are intended to emulate the arches on the sides of the original World Trade Center buildings designed by Minoru Yamasaki. The plaza itself is also designed to be a comfortable space with pavers making things feel more human scale and trees providing lots of shade.¹⁶ This desire to make the physical aspects of the memorial more comfortable, leaves room for the mental and emotional aspects to be more prevalent.

Lastly is the Callery Pear Tree otherwise known as "The Survivor Tree." In October of 2001, recovery workers found this tree at Ground Zero severely damaged and members of NYC's Parks and Recreation Department were able to salvage the tree and nurse it back to

¹¹ 11groundzero.com

¹² Ibid.

¹³ www.history.com

¹⁴ 911groundzero.com

¹⁵ www.pwpla.com

¹⁶ Ibid.

health. It returned to Ground Zero in 2010 and stands in the plaza as a symbol of resilience and connection. The decision to include such an amazing tree helps remind people that there is a sense of hope among all the destruction. The memorial was opened on the tenth anniversary of the attacks in 2011 and was completed in August of 2015.

One of the main goals of the memorial is to help heal. While there is never a way to undo the tragedy or bring anyone back, there is a way to use the site and remnants of the World Trade Center to help a broken city, country, and people. When something so close to every citizen and so public happens, the mass trauma and wounds are immeasurable. We still see the effects of 9/11. Through putting victims' names close to their friends or coworkers, the design helps give that family the solace that their loved ones are still close to the ones they were with. Another aspect of healing seen in the memorial is the trees. Nature helps improve mental health and provides so many healing measures for humans. Also the natural cycle of trees as they change color, drop their leaves, then grow again symbolizes the growth and rebirth of the city and its people.¹⁷ By showing physical healing through nature, the memorial shows the visitors that this city and its people are also healing, although the cycle is never complete as it just continues going through the same phases, much like we will never forget the events of 9/11.

The memorial also takes on a “paradise garden” theme through its urban forest and strong presence of nature within such a large city. This paradise garden is one for healing. A place where loved ones can come and reconnect with their loved ones, where citizens can remember and reflect on a tragedy, or where people can experience the event for the first time through this memorial. The sound of the waterfall helps drown out the noises from the city. This Creates a more tranquil and quieter environment, one rich for meditation, feeling, and healing.¹⁸ When I visited, it was almost dead silent with only the sounds of nature around; never once did I feel like I was in the middle of one of the largest cities. It was truly magical and really set the scene for the story being told.

It is equally important to remember and preserve the lives and events of that day. Not the terror or death or fear, but the heroics of hundreds of first responders, the lives of the people lost, and the way our nation came together. This idea of preservation is felt throughout the memorial and even more highlighted throughout the museum beneath it. The names continue to hold meaning even here. By listing each person and placing them in their specific places, they're connected to the area, life, and memory. We preserve their names here for all eternity. Visitors may see a white rose placed beneath a name when they visit. This rose is placed by workers before opening to symbolize that it is that victim's birthday.¹⁹ The roses preserve their lives even after their deaths. The pools themselves preserve the footprints of the buildings, so that even though they do not stand anymore, we will always remember they were there. The pools also preserve the idea of never forgetting because the pools will never fill with water. The

¹⁷ www.pwpla.com

¹⁸ 911groundzero.com

¹⁹ 911groundzero.com

continuous flow represents the pain that continues to be felt to this day and the suffering of that day.

Koenig's Sphere is another example of preservation. The giant sphere is a metal sculpture that stood in the World Trade Center Plaza. It was designed by Fritz Koenig. The sculpture stands untouched and exactly where it was found in the wreckage at Ground Zero. It was found mostly intact but is visibly mangled.²⁰ Instead of fixing it and trying to hide what happened, this statue is preserved in the state it was found because we cannot ignore or hide from the truth of what happened there that day.

Lastly, the 9/11 Memorial honors the victims, first responders, and all those still affected to this day. The Memorial Glade was an added feature to the Memorial to honor all those who are sick or have died from toxins or injuries from the aftermath of 9/11.²¹ This list is extensive and now includes tens of thousands of people from first responders, recovery and relief workers to volunteers and ordinary civilians. What started as a rescue mission quickly became a nine-month long recovery mission to recover all the bodies and remove over two million tons of debris from the site. Exposure to the toxins and hazards from the attacks affected workers at all three attack sites.²² The Glade is intended to recognize the determination and perseverance of all those who helped in the recovery efforts.²³

Positioned in the southwest corner of the plaza, the Memorial Glade is a large pathway flanked by six granite monoliths. The path itself is a slight ramp which is placed exactly where the temporary ramp that was used to access the wreckage at Ground Zero was in the months following the attacks.²⁴ This decision to again place something exactly where it was found during the time heightens the immersive experience and allows visitors to honor the workers by walking where they walked. The monoliths were made by a two-man team in Vermont then transported by a police escorted team of trucks to New York City. The stones are very jagged and rough, which symbolizes the challenges faced by those who this glade honors.²⁵ The monoliths are also encased in steel bars, which were crafted from recovered steel from the WTC even further honoring the work done by clean-up workers. This Memorial was opened on May 30th, 2019, which was the 17th anniversary of the end of the recovery period.²⁶

The 9/11 Memorial is also crucial in providing a space for people who were not alive or do not have an association with the events to learn, grieve, and experience. The National September 11 Memorial and Museum are often seen as stewards of how we memorialize current events and tragedies. The design of the landscapes helps us as modern audiences experience and understand what happened to create crucial connections to a national event that

²⁰ 911groundzero.com

²¹ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial

²² www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/memorial-glade

²³ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial

²⁴ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/memorial-glade

²⁵ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/memorial-glade

²⁶ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial

still affects our lives today. As Micieli-Voutsinas says, the memorial is built for the “impressionable consumer in absence of lived memories.”²⁷

A prime example of the people who may have this experience at this memorial is children and young adults born after 2000. A study done at the memorial for Flight 93, found that adolescent visitors were exposed to dealing with real negative emotions and that they seemed to grasp the importance of the memorial.²⁸ This study, while not directly about the memorial in NYC, can be translated to it. The memorial is curated so that visitors who have memories related to the event can have just as impactful an experience as those who do not.

The last way that the 9/11 Memorial carries their message through the future is through the Survivor Tree Seedling Program which was started in 2013 with the Bartlett Tree Experts of Stamford CT and a local high school in Queens, NY. The groups donate seedlings from the Survivor Tree to three communities each year that have undergone some tragedy. Some examples include the World Health Organization for their COVID-19 work, Boston after the bombing in 2013, and Parkland, Florida after the shooting in 2018.²⁹ This program highlights the idea of nature and memorial as healing. In a way, the 9/11 Memorial is passing on some of its healing to other communities in times of tragedy in the way they got support back in 2001.

The 9/11 National Memorial was designed after a massive tragedy that shook our nation to its core. The design of the Memorial invites visitors to mourn, feel, and experience the events of 9/11 in whatever way they see fit. Through its tree groves, massive pools, and beautifully inscribed names, the 9/11 Memorial helps its visitors heal, the city preserve the events, and a nation honor the victims.

²⁷ www.taylorfrancis-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org

²⁸ tandfonline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org

²⁹ www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/survivor-tree/survivor-tree-seedling-program

Sources

“9/11 Memorial Glade.” 9/11 Memorial Glade | National September 11 Memorial & Museum. National September 11 Memorial & Museum, 2021.
<https://www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/memorial-glade>.

Andrea R. Croom, Chloe Squitiero & Mary Margaret Kerr (2018) Something So Sad Can Be So Beautiful: A Qualitative Study of Adolescent Experiences at a 9/11 Memorial, Visitor Studies, 21:2, 157-174, DOI: [10.1080/10645578.2018.1541652](https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2018.1541652)

“About the Memorial.” About the Memorial | National September 11 Memorial & Museum. National September 11 Memorial & Museum, 2021.
<https://www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/about-memorial>.

Foundry, Brooklyn Digital. “9/11 Memorial: PWP Landscape Architecture.” 9/11 Memorial | PWP Landscape Architecture. PWP Landscape Architecture, 2022.
<http://www.pwpla.com/national-911-memorial>.

Hammond, Gabby. “Rebuilding Ground Zero: Design of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum.” 9/11 Ground Zero, October 30, 2020.
<https://911groundzero.com/blog/rebuilding-ground-zero-architects-behind-911-memorial-museum/>.

History.com Editors. *Making of the 9/11 Memorial*. History.com. A&E Television Networks, 2012.
<https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/making-the-911-memorial-the-names-video>.

Micieli-Voutsinas, Jacque. “Introduction & Conclusion.” Essay. In *Affective Heritage and the Politics of Memory after 9/11: Curating Trauma at the Memorial Museum*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021.

“Survivor Tree Seedling Program.” Survivor Tree Seedling Program | National September 11 Memorial & Museum. National September 11th Memorial & Museum, 2021.
<https://www.911memorial.org/visit/memorial/survivor-tree/survivor-tree-seedling-program>

"The Winning Memorial." *New York Times*, January 8, 2004, A32. Gale General OneFile (accessed April 20, 2022).
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A111955474/ITOF?u=coloboulder&sid=summon&xid=b68e0b45>.