

## *Exhibit Reviews*

*The National September 11 Memorial & Museum.* ALICE GREENWALD, Director, Memorial Museum & Executive Vice President, Exhibitions, Collections & Education; JAN SEIDLER RAMIREZ, Chief Curator & Vice President of Collections; AMY S. WEISSER, Vice President of Exhibitions & Director of Exhibition Development; MICHAEL SHULAN, Creative Director. DAVIS BRODY BOND, Museum Architect; SNØHETTA, Museum Pavilion Architects; THINC DESIGN and LAYMAN DESIGN, Exhibition Designers; LOCAL PROJECTS, Media Designers. Opened May 21, 2014, ongoing, <http://www.911memorial.org/>.

Few museum professionals have ever faced challenges as great as the historians, curators, and designers tasked with creating the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in Lower Manhattan. Politicians of all stripes, families of the attacks' victims, developers anxious to rebuild on some of the world's most valuable real estate as well as the notoriously opinionated New York public comprised an often fractious group of stakeholders virtually guaranteeing that at any point in time someone was unhappy with what was underway. Throw in a once-in-a-lifetime hurricane, the unique dilemmas posed by exhibiting artifacts from a massive crime scene, and several construction delays prompted by bureaucratic wrangling, and it is a wonder that the project came to fruition as it did.

Over eight years in the making at a cost of more than \$700 million, the 9/11 Museum opened to the public on May 21, 2014. A spokesman reports that during its first five months, the museum attracted over 1.3 million visitors. The museum's creators have skillfully blended still and moving images with artifacts and well-executed soundscapes to create an emotionally wrenching experience, made all the more so because it takes place amid a vast underground space that is at once gigantic and intimate, raw and polished. There is a great deal to see and many visitors may find a second or even third trip necessary to absorb the full story.

A two-story glass and steel pavilion situated between the two memorial reflecting pools accommodates the museum's entrance, complete with security screening stations familiar to any air traveler, and on the second floor, an auditorium and small café. The museum experience begins one floor below the entry level, where visitors enter a darkened concourse and immediately encounter a dramatic photograph of the undamaged Twin Towers. A nearby introductory text for the exhibition relies on just 185 words to narrate the events of September 11 in crisp, largely unemotional language. The introduction closes with a reminder of the far-reaching impact of the attacks:

“Approximately two billion people, almost one third of the world’s population, are estimated to have witnessed these horrific events via television, radio, and internet broadcasts that day.”

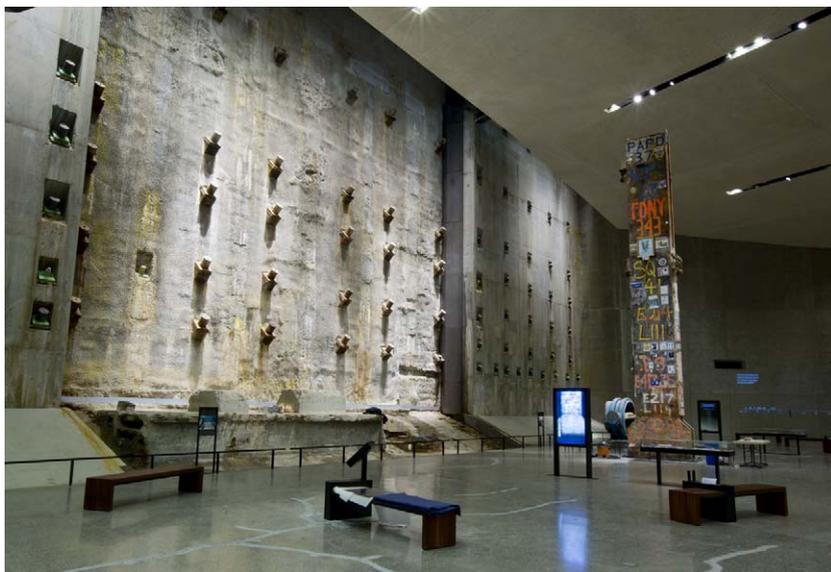
The anodyne character of the introductory text sets the tone for the interpretive labeling throughout the museum. Clearly the work of many hands, the exhibit script consistently eschews opinion and analysis, relying instead on eyewitness and first-person accounts to propel the narrative. This approach can appear bloodless, but it seems appropriate for a subject colored by abundant political considerations as well as deep emotional meaning for hundreds of thousands of people. The visitor encounters first-person accounts almost immediately after entering the concourse—a soundscape and a series of floor-to-ceiling cloth banners use projected quotes and photographs of onlookers to capture the chaos and disbelief as the towers burned and then collapsed.

The concourse gradually narrows to become a ramp leading to Memorial Hall, where the pathways to the exhibitions intersect. Along the way a visitor can pause at an overlook to view the monumental Foundation Hall, which features the slurry wall, the fortification against flooding by the Hudson River that survived the collapse of the towers, and the iconic “Last Column.” The walk along the ramp also passes photographs of the towers, projections of posters for missing loved ones, and three twisted pieces of “impact” steel from the northern façade of the North Tower, where Flight 11 razored into floors 93 through 99.

The final descent, by stairs or an escalator, takes the visitor alongside the Survivors’ Stairs, which provided a lifesaving escape route for hundreds who fled the North Tower before its collapse. Upon reaching the main exhibition floor, a visitor can choose one of two routes. One leads toward the various memorials and education classrooms that occupy the footprint of the South Tower: *In Memoriam*, the adjacent Tribute Walk, and a theater showing *Rebirth at Ground Zero*, a ten-minute film chronicling the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site.

*In Memoriam*, designed as a room within a room, is the museum’s primary memorial statement. The outer walls are lined with photographs of those killed during the 1993 and 2001 attacks. An accompanying audio track offers brief tributes by friends and family members. The darkened interior room serves as a theater in which each victim is profiled in photographs, briefly rendered biographies, and recorded remembrances. The setting is respectful and engaging, even for those who have no personal connection to the 9/11 tragedy.

Visitors reaching the main floor and choosing instead to walk toward the historical exhibition will first pass *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning*, an artwork by Spencer Finch composed of 2,983 squares, each in a different shade of blue, commemorating the number of people killed in the 1993 and 2001 attacks. In the middle of the installation rests a quote from Virgil—“No day shall erase you from the memory of time”—that encapsulates the museum’s essential mission. Behind the wall



Last Column in Foundation Hall. The Last Column was removed during a ceremony on May 30, 2002 to mark the end of the recovery and cleanup efforts at Ground Zero. The slurry wall, shown on the left, is the engineering marvel that originally prevented the Hudson River from flooding the Twin Towers' basements and survived their collapse. (Photograph by Jin Lee. Courtesy the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum.)

on which the artwork is mounted repose the remains of unidentified victims from the September 11 attack. Although some have objected to the inclusion of these remains within a public space, their presence is noted only on a small plaque and the solemnity and respectful tone throughout the museum pay appropriate tribute to those victims whose remains may never be identified.

To reach the entrance to the historical exhibition, visitors first walk past a succession of large, free-standing objects—a piece of the radio and television antenna that sat atop the North Tower, a part of an elevator motor, and the Ladder Company 3 truck from the Fire Department, City of New York (FDNY). Like other large signature objects displayed throughout the museum, these artifacts take on an almost sculptural quality that at first glance seems out of place amid a story about human tragedy and resilience. Whatever their aesthetic qualities, these out-sized artifacts do carry an important message about the almost unimaginable destructive forces generated by the jet liners smashing into the towers and the buildings' subsequent collapse.

The historical exhibition *September 11, 2001* consists of three sections. The first and largest is *The Day-9/11*, chronicling events beginning at 8:46 am, with a slow-motion clip of American Flight 11 tearing into the North Tower. A public school calendar, a pair of Yankee tickets, voting materials for that day's mayoral primary election, and other memorabilia that hint at a normal



Memorial Tribute Wall. The Wall of Faces presents portrait photographs of the nearly three thousand victims of the September 11, 2001 and the February 26, 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center. (Photograph by Jin Lee. Courtesy the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum.)



Ladder 3. Created on September 11, 1865 and located at 108 East 13th Street in Manhattan's East Village, Company 3 was one of New York City's oldest ladder companies. Last seen on the fortieth floor of the North Tower, the company lost thirteen men in the September attack. (Photograph by Jin Lee. Courtesy the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum.)

late summer day in New York City provide sharp juxtapositions to clips of an anxious Matt Lauer's first reports of the developing story and a soundscape of news reports, telephone calls, and eyewitness accounts. Although displays of artifacts such as building and glass fragments from the North Tower and clothing and equipment used by the rescuers summon strong reactions, the photographs most powerfully evoke the day's horrors. Two images are especially poignant. One shows several articles of clothing, including one bloody shoe, scattered among the dust and debris at a nearby street corner. A second captures a woman later identified as Edna Cintron standing in the North Tower impact zone seconds before she fell to her death over ninety floors below.

A series of still photographs and a film clip capture the impact of the second hijacked plane, United Flight 175, between floors 77 to 85 of the South Tower at 9:03 am. It is almost impossible to turn away from these horrific yet commanding images. Plane fragments, including one that fell three blocks away; a page from an inflight magazine; and a blue Land's End shoulder bag and battered tray from the nearby Marriott Hotel, both used by fleeing survivors to shield their heads from falling debris, are among the artifacts that reinforce the photographic record.

A small, almost hidden alcove shows several chilling images of people leaping from the towers to escape the flames. "You felt compelled to watch out of respect to them," recalls one Lower Manhattan resident in an accompanying label. "They were ending their life without a choice, and to turn away from them would have been wrong." A second observer narrates the fate of one victim. "This woman stood there for what seemed like minutes. Then she held down her skirt and stepped off the ledge. I thought how human, how modest, to hold down her skirt before she jumped. I couldn't look anymore."

The exhibit devotes separate alcoves to the crash of American Flight 77 into the west façade of the Pentagon at 9:37 am and of United Flight 93 in Somerset County, Pennsylvania at 10:03 am. These stories rely on a mix of recordings of telephone calls and eyewitness accounts with a few select artifacts, such as the business card and wristwatch of Flight 93 passenger Todd Beamer, one of the leaders of the effort to overpower the hijackers.

*The Day-9/11* concludes with the collapse of the South and North Towers, at 9:59 am and 10:28 am respectively, captured with video, still photography, and artifacts ranging from a second fire truck and a wrecked ambulance to such personal items as a BlackBerry and a pair of slippers.

Absent a single unified storyline, the exhibition's second section—*Before 9/11*—lacks the narrative drive and cohesiveness of *The Day-9/11*. Models, photographs, and memorabilia chronicle the history of the Twin Towers, with an emphasis on their symbolic importance to New York and American capitalism. One of the most difficult issues facing the museum's creators was how to incorporate the story of the 9/11 attacks' planning and participants without offending the families of those who died at their hands. One timeline charts the rise of al-Qaeda and emergence of Osama Bin Laden. A second documents the hijackers' training, while an animated map traces the routes the four planes

took on September 11 and small photographs identify the nineteen al-Qaeda terrorists. According to one of the exhibition's organizers, the absence of original objects with direct links to the 9/11 terrorists is due in large part to the protracted prosecution of the Guantanamo detainees and the federal government's decision to retain this key evidence for potential use in the trials.

In charting a careful course between the memorial demands of the site and the complexities of the Islamic fundamentalism that fueled the hijackers' attacks, the exhibition condenses the story of the hijackers and their motivations to its bare essentials. In doing so, *Before 9/11* misses an opportunity to provide in-depth analysis of the backgrounds and motives of the hijackers and the marginal place their extreme thinking occupies within the larger Islamic world. It is nowhere noted, for example, that fifteen of the nineteen were natives of Saudi Arabia, the United States' putative Middle Eastern ally.

The concluding section of the exhibition—*After 9/11*—explores the weeks following the attack and the long-term recovery effort. A soundscape featuring interviews with firefighters accompanies the by-now-familiar array of powerful photographs, videos, and objects. Two artifacts resonate with special power. An impromptu shrine created in the Chelsea Jeans store a block from Ground Zero epitomizes the spontaneity of the memorial efforts in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and reveals some of the difficulties in creating the museum. The blue jeans and red, blue, and yellow tank tops, t-shirts, and sweaters that comprise the display are begrimed with toxic dust that had to be painstakingly removed, examined to insure that it contained no human remains, and then reapplied, all while protecting conservators from any ominous contaminants. The second is a "composite," an approximately thirty-inch thick slab of dark material that is all that remains of five floors that were pancaked together during the collapse of one of the buildings. An accompanying label notes that, "the intense heat and pressure . . . would likely render the presence of identifiable human remains within them impossible." Although they are "material evidence of the devastation and conditions of the towers' collapse," the label text continues, these composites "also represent the unknowable."

Before exiting the historical exhibition, visitors can consider suggested answers to a series of questions:

- How do we know what happened on 9/11?
- Who should be held accountable?
- How can America protect its citizens from terrorism?
- What are some of the physical and mental health effects of 9/11?
- How are victims identified?
- How should we remember?

The exhibition's general reluctance to adopt an analytical tone is nowhere more apparent than in the response to the question of accountability. While discussing al-Qaeda, the Victim's Compensation Fund and law suits against the airlines, and the 9/11 Commission's investigation and recommendations



Located a block from the World Trade Center, the Chelsea Jeans store was but one of many small businesses shuttered by the 9/11 attacks. Forced to destroy all but \$1,000 of his merchandise, owner David Cohen encased the remainder to create a memorial that attracted thousands. Few purchased anything, however, and on October 26, 2002 Chelsea Jeans went out of business. (Photograph by Jin Lee. Courtesy the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum.)

for a major overhaul of America's homeland security, the text fails to include any suggestion that existing intelligence findings, by now a well-established fact, might have averted the attacks if heeded at the time. Although the degree to which visitors note the absence of such analytical observations may depend on their political persuasion, the museum might at least have trusted its audience to wrestle with the controversies that have continued to surround the 9/11 attacks.

Upon exiting, the visitor passes a large case of quilts, photographs, books, and other examples of "tribute art" and a timeline of terrorist activities between 2002 and the present before entering Foundation Hall, the museum's culminating space. Well over forty feet in height, the space is bounded along one side by the slurry wall and contains the "Last Column," several large artifacts, and benches, many of which have interactive screens on which the visitor can trace the victims, rescue and recovery workers, and witnesses. A recording studio accessible from the Hall screens scholars, prominent public officials and well-known Americans, and members of the general public responding to four questions:

- How has your view of 9/11 changed over the last thirteen years?
- How is American different?
- Do you think it's important to remember 9/11?
- How has your life been affected by the events of 9/11?

Visitors are also invited to participate by recording their own thoughts for inclusion in the museum's archive.

Even a moderately conscientious visitor will spend at least three hours in the museum grappling with a historical event awash in thousands of individual tragedies; all but the most hardened will emerge from the experience physically and emotionally drained. Given the many conflicting agendas and unachievable expectations they faced, the creators of the National September 11 Memorial Museum have produced a thoughtful and moving narrative of a day that will continue to shape our national life for decades. Their work is perhaps best understood as a journalistic enterprise that represents "history's first draft." They have been reluctant to set the historical context for the 9/11 attacks or analyze why the attacks occurred and what their impact has been both here and abroad. How does the tragedy of 9/11, for example, compare to other black moments in American history?

It seems apparent that those charged with setting the interpretive agenda felt, for the moment at least, that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 remain too politically and emotionally charged for the museum to demystify the complexities of Islamic terrorism, the domestic impact of the attacks, or American politics and foreign policy since 9/11. Perhaps in the future the museum's public lectures and symposia, teacher training, publications, and online resources will tackle these and other questions we can ill afford to ignore. The National September 11 Memorial Museum represents a well-realized and important step in a process of understanding our "age of terror." But it is only a first step.

Those not planning a trip to the Memorial Museum anytime soon should visit the museum's robust website at <http://www.911memorial.org>, where they will find a wide array of visual images, oral histories, collections information, lesson plans and teaching guides, webcasts, and a well-done interactive 9/11 timeline.

Those interested in September 11 might also visit an online exhibition, *The Family Room at One Liberty Plaza*, which can be found at <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/familyroom/> on the New York State Museum's website. The nightmarish manner in which nearly three thousand people died in the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center deprived their families of often-comforting mourning rituals. Ground Zero remains the grave of all but those few whose bodies were recovered. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation created an outdoor viewing platform overlooking the site for families to visit. Thousands of photographs, messages, and memorabilia soon blanketed the platform. This material was relocated to the twentieth floor of One Liberty Plaza overlooking the World Trade Center site.

The Family Room, as this space came to be known, was reserved for family members alone, and for nearly thirteen years served as a place for people from all over the world to come and grieve for their loved ones. It became, in the words of one family member, "a singular intersection where horrific tragedy and boundless caring and love" met. The opening of the 9/11 Museum in 2014



Panoramic View of the Family Room at One Liberty Plaza. (Courtesy of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.)

led to the transfer of some of the materials from One Liberty Plaza to a new family room in the museum. The remainder was given to the New York State Museum (although the right to reclaim materials has been reserved for the families).

The State Museum's web exhibition features a virtual tour of the original room, reflections by family members, and a four-minute video that takes you behind the scenes. The staggering volume of the memorabilia and other materials left by the families, many of whom visited frequently, often on birthdays and other important anniversaries, bespeaks the pain of thousands of people who lost loved ones. For even the most casual viewer, it serves as a reminder of the contingent nature of our lives as well as the terrible human cost of religious zealotry.

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