

# Delayering - A Walk to Ground Zero

**Sunday, November 18th, 2001**

A brilliant sunny morning. I was pleased to have free time before the weight of next week dropped. I sat close to the large south-facing loft windows to read a magazine, something I rarely do, and would only do on a Sunday morning. The article revealed details of Osama bin Laden's youth and family – he had more than twenty siblings. Everyone has a human side.

Just before noon I biked down to my studio. The streets and sidewalks were crowded; the sun, like an electromagnet, was attracting people, pulling them outdoors. In my small Soho space, I couldn't settle or get started with any of my open projects. Unable to resist the force, I submitted and was drawn back out.

Walking south and west, I reached Canal Street and crossed six lanes of traffic to reach the Hudson. As always, it was refreshing to be near the river – the expanse of open space that a broad river provides is a tonic for those who live in forests or cities.

After a short walk south my route along the riverfront promenade was blocked. No explanation, just the word “Detour.” A gigantic red crane, an industrial-scale puppeteer, dominated the forbidden landscape near Pier 25. The oddly articulated crane puppeteer controlled a large yellow wedge-shaped bin as its marionette. In the sky, the wedge seemed small, but on the ground, I could see that it was more than twenty feet long – a full-size dumpster sliced diagonally from the top to bottom at the opposite end.

The wedge was the principal character in transferring millions of tons of the former World Trade Towers from land to sea. This spot was the pivot point for these architectural remains on their journey from their urban home to an unknown final resting place. The impact of two commercial airliners precipitated a series of unusual and unexpected technological challenges. I had stumbled upon an inspiring show of human response executed with ingenuity and skill. The show was precise, enchanting – an unceremonious ceremony – if there can be such a thing.

Nine loaded dump trucks, in all shapes and sizes, waited for their turn with the wedge. The front truck pulled away from the line and backed into a position precisely where the wedge

would arrive. The red crane dropped the yellow wedge quickly, slowing just before it touched down – like a high-speed elevator reaching the lobby from the 33rd floor. Back on earth, it aligned with the waiting trucks and the river’s flow less than twenty feet away. Just before the ready truck started to back up a worker beside the wedge turned on a fire hose. His orange hard hat snapped backward from the pressure. The stout man in brown coveralls, work gloves, and no respirator needed two hands and a solid stance to direct the thick glistening arc of freshwater as the truck backed all the way into the wedge. Nothing was rushed, but not a moment was wasted; the truck's bed started to tilt up before it reached the back wall of the wedge.

Depending on the configuration of the load, the mangled mass either dropped with one loud burst or fell with several smaller crashes. Certain loads were surprisingly quiet. All were dark, twisted, tortured. Taking it all in I began to notice that some of the steel remains appeared almost human, childish stick figures with broken and distorted body parts. Like clean skeletons on the Serengeti Plain, without a trace of flesh remaining, these steel bones were mostly free of attached material – all burned or blasted off by repeated hosing.

After filling the wedge, each truck pulled slowly forward, allowing lingering bits to drop. The empty dump bed lowered as it continued out of the wedge and back to the site to collect another ten-ton load. The same cycle had been continuing, probably twenty-four hours a day, for weeks. There was a lot to haul away.

The puppeteer jerked the strings and the front edge of the colossal wedge tipped up containing its new load. A burst of black smoke and the wedge, with its tons of steel, lifted twenty-five feet into the air. Barely a breath and it swung out over the river, steadied in a way that a plumb bob or other dangling mass does not readily do, then dropped straight into position, just over the target barge. Another black burst and with the deep bow of a Shakespearean actor, the wedge tipped forward. The charred load dropped.

No time to celebrate or mourn, the empty wedge leveled, lifted, and followed the identical arc back to receive another load.

The puppet show was transfixing and free. Other walkers arrived; most stopped to watch the industrial choreography before detouring. It was compelling and graceful with an unlikely human feel. Onlookers stayed for a full cycle or, like me, lingered longer. As the next truck readied itself, I noticed a second crane – older, higher, and in command of a more rusted wedge. On this glorious fall Sunday afternoon, it was still.

Occasionally a truck's load wouldn't dump. The problem was always a piece of steel wedged crosswise in the truck's bed. A mid-size dinosaur looking machine on bulldozer treads approached to quickly pick the stuck steel out. One of the pried-loose pieces mistakenly dropped over the side of a dump truck, like a piece of kindling, but large enough to crush a car. The scale was impossible to take in.

Several barges and one tug lined up to receive their load of ferrous carnage. Barges hold a lot of material, more than what can fit into ten full railroad cars. Moving material over water is far more efficient than moving it by road or rail – even more so if the load is very heavy. Water supports all loads.

At two p.m., the second crane came alive. Perhaps the operator was back from lunch. No trucks were waiting in its queue - though after a few minutes they arrived. In less than two cycles I could see that this crane was operated in a more “cowboy” style – faster, with less finesse than the first crane, which was more like a ballet. Exceptional performances unwittingly teach viewers what average means.

At the first wedge, a white NYC dump truck did not back into the wedge like the other trucks. Instead, it dropped its load just in front, like a bad puppy missing the newspaper target. With the jerky mechanical motions of an early King Kong movie the entangled bits of the fresh dump were plucked up and maneuvered into the waiting wedge by the dinosaur machine. Was this a new driver who did not know that he was supposed to back into the wedge? Or perhaps certain loads would perforate the wedge's floor, so dropping on the pavement was safer. This was a complex operation with endless divergent issues to balance, yet it appeared simple – like with a good art installation. The planning, labor, and experience do not need to be seen by everyone, they are present.

With no trucks ready to dump, the show paused. I moved on. After re-crossing the West Side Highway I reached Chambers Street and turned toward the river again. My route followed the northern edge of the 1960s landfill, ninety acres of lower Manhattan real estate – minted with unwanted dirt and sand – modern-day alchemy.

Air monitoring devices perched behind the Stuyvesant School, each powered by impossibly long extension cords. Who reads their data? What are they recording and will we ever know the findings – dangerous or not? Government officials don't have a good track record for being honest about dangers, especially those that are invisible.

The river's surface sparkled. I stopped to watch more of the wedge show. From this angle. I could see that both of the crane puppeteers were balanced on huge work barges. Cranes need sturdy bases to brace their high towers against their leveraged loads, but these puppeteers were afloat.

I cut south through the northern end of Battery Park City, traversing the goose-shit-covered Great Lawn; a green carpet laid over the landfill when the upscale residential apartments were completed. The mostly empty, river-view apartments looked unchanged since they were evacuated in September but hardly anyone was around.

At the recently completed New York Mercantile Exchange I watched a man walk past the entrance with his video camera rolling. A guard rushed out to stop him. "Let me see your camera," she demanded. He refused and the short interaction ended – the guy walked away with the hardly valuable footage; the restrictions on photography mystify me.

Past the Exchange, a corner of the blue-green Winter Garden came into view. Surprisingly, for such a fragile material, the glass pavilion appeared intact. The last time I was inside there were more than a dozen full-sized palm trees – a delightful escape from the northeast. However, as I kept walking I could see that nearly all of its eastern side was ripped open and most of its arched roof was gone, a wounded building. Looking beyond the Winter Garden, past the sovereign void where the twin towers once blocked the view, the Millennium Hotel had become prominent or at least visible. The dark tower, wrapped in red netting, seemed taller than I remembered it last spring. Size, among other phenomena, is relative to what came before, to what we remember.

The North Cove boat basin, normally filled with rich people's white yachts and a cluster of small club sailboats, remained empty except for the squeaking docks. Two dozen steps beyond the Police Memorial a weathered white vinyl tarp partly covered an impromptu memorial. The small shrine was more alive than the immortal Police monument, a black stone wall built in 1997. The flicker of candles and recently left mementos transmitted a charge that names carved in stone can never hold – like comparing a poem to a history book about the same person or event. It was strange to see dead flowers still in their plastic sleeves as though they had just been purchased.

Continuing south with the river on my right I turned inland and quickly reached Battery Park City's small retail section. It was a surreal landscape. The little grocery store, dry cleaners,

and restaurants remained mostly closed. The area was intact, not boarded-up, but deserted. Signs reading “Welcome Back – Will Reopen Soon.” were taped into the shop windows. Battery Park City gardeners pressure-washed everything in sight: trees, sidewalks, vehicles even though everything was already very clean.

A few misplaced tourists were peppered into the mostly male mélange of uniformed workers. National Guard personnel milled around with respirators but no weapons, there were police, ASPCA, and others I could not identify, but unlike the previous two months, there was not a single gun in sight.

It is surprising how quickly we forget after most buildings or stores disappear, but as I walked past the entrance to the "VIP viewing area," the remaining buildings reminded me, in my core, that I was close to where the southern tower once stood.

South of Liberty Street, the city streets had been re-opened to vehicles though I did not see any. Moran’s Ale House, in the old St. George’s Chapel, was “OPEN,” according to a sign spray-painted on a bedsheet, but there was not one person anywhere around.

A row of color Xerox photographs taped into the large street-level windows of George’s Lunch Shop attracted my attention. The images showed the corner restaurant shortly after September 11th. At first glance, the pictures looked like they had been taken during a blizzard, but the “snow” was off-white. It took some time before I realized the yellowish substance was the cremation remains of the towers.

The small restaurant was closed, but its interior appeared intact. I doubt such a place would ever be open on a weekend in this part of town. It was unclear if it had or ever would reopen. The pictures clearly revealed how much had been cleaned up – an impressive amount. When do you stop, I wondered? After a glass breaks I sweep again and again but a little piece of the glass often lingers; perhaps similar reasoning was propelling this relentless cleaning of the already clean. Or was this theatre, a way to make all of us feel safer or help residents feel safe enough to move back home?

No one was around at Rector Street, south of the extensive World Trade Center site. I wandered through the dark, narrow streets of old New York with no destination; turning a typical corner, I encountered an unobstructed view into the site, my first. Face to face with a tiger or snake, but without danger, more of a confrontation with the past.

Motionless, I processed what was in front of me. A section of facade, presumably from the southern tower. A fragment – if that word could be used for something seventy-five feet high, taller than any brownstone in New York. Pointed arches indicated that this fragment came from the very top of the tower, a cornice if there was such an element in Yamasaki's design. Nearly nine stories of building skin. Eerily, it was not only undamaged but almost perfectly vertical – gently perched on the same ground I was standing on. A few months ago it was part of a whole and 1,300 feet overhead.

The surrounding landscape was devastated, low crumpled architectural wreckage, all black, except for what had rusted in recent weeks. At an adjacent gate, loaded trucks were leaving the site. Each one was showered and covered before heading out, back for another dance with the wedge. A small group of police officers loitered by the gate – protecting what? Nothing was left to take or destroy. As the days shortened the low sun could not reach the area; a group of police huddled near a trashcan fire; except for their service caps the scene reminded me of a homeless gathering on a cold day.

I turned to leave, to head north. It didn't take long to be free of the discordant neighborhood. With a clear destination ahead my strides lengthened and my mind wandered back to the overly clean streets, the overly quiet residential areas, the empty trucks entering a construction site, the police imitating the homeless, and the oversized fragment. I barely needed to tip my head back to see the top of what was once the tallest building in the world. It was nearly at eye level.

James Boorstein

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