

First Visit to the Memorial

Monday, September 14th, 2015

To my surprise, I am here.

“Here” is almost exactly the midpoint between where the two tall towers stood for only thirty years. The last time I was “here” was in June 2001—on the day I was married. Within a month, I expect to be divorced. Everything has a lifespan. Lives can be extended, historic buildings can be preserved, and people with cancer can be treated effectively. But eventually time runs out. And that’s it.

Sitting on a rectangular granite bench, I feel still and awake. This is a very different “here” than anyone could have envisioned in June 2001, only a few months before the young towers disappeared. Over the last few days, 400 buildings arrived at the same end point— disappeared, burned to ash in the huge Valley Fire in north-central California. Some were pioneer shacks and barns that seemed as though they would exist for another century or more. But, like the colossal towers, the centenarian structures are gone. Completely gone.

I arrived by bicycle, riding north on West Street, one of the city’s least bike-friendly routes. For no apparent reason, there are an optimistic number of bike racks, almost all empty. I locked my bike and walked toward the street-level plaza, passing between two irregularly shaped, two-story structures. Clad with a silver-grey metal mesh, without a single window or horizontal line to define them, the rectilinear masses might be disguised ventilation towers supporting subterranean activity. It seemed they longed to be invisible.

Beyond the shy structures, the first thing I noticed was the trees—dozens of them forming a broad low green canopy and creating an intimate space—as good architecture can. The diameter of the trunks indicated that the trees were about fourteen years old. Could that be? Trees born as the towers died—what a superb idea for a memorial. The bark color and trunk diameters vary; they did not seem to be from a single nursery, as is common with new public plantings. It

delighted me to imagine that each tree was found and dug up as a sapling—an admirable, if whimsical, idea.

Alternating stripes of grass and ivy form the western edge of the plaza. Trees rise only from the ivy beds or the granite pavers, never from the parallel bands of lush grass. The trees are swamp oaks, a type of white oak that can grow to be quite tall. One of the earliest surviving buildings in New York City is a swamp oak timber frame structure built in 1675 by the Dutch settler Jan Martense Schenck. As if defying destiny, his house was dismantled in the 1950s, stored for more than a decade, and then reassembled inside the Brooklyn Museum.

This plaza will be a very different place in twenty years—if the trees survive that long. The canopy will probably be higher. Perhaps there will be less need for the intimacy. The emotions of 9/11 will continue to diminish, and the extensive construction that is underway in this area will likely be complete, at least for this cycle. Hopefully, there is a plan to protect these trees from rising saltwater, since the ground here is only a few feet above sea level.

I arrived just past noon, after dropping off lunch and some treats for my sweetheart near the southernmost tip of the island of Manhattan. We met for a few moments and smiled at each other while she transferred the food into her bag, lest a co-worker learns that someone had brought her lunch. Then she headed back to her fifteenth-floor office as I rode off with no immediate destination—a rare bit of open time. I wanted to find a place to sit and work; the expansive empty bike rack caught my attention and led me to this quiet stone bench.

Sitting still provides an opportunity to notice.

A few wispy clouds float through the sky—one which is not as blue as it was fourteen years and three days ago. The Memorial Plaza is sparsely populated. It's lunchtime, but hardly anyone is eating. It is surprisingly quiet, but not silent. Sounds of falling water, traffic, sirens, construction, and an occasional plane permeate the air. The energy here is muted in a pleasant way. How much of this energy arises from the people and how much arises from the inherent power of the physical place or the strength of the architecture and design? Likely some of each.

About half the visitors are speaking English; the rest are speaking an assortment of other languages. Endless varieties of selfie sticks are in use. Not many cops (or at least cops in uniform) and no big weapons are visible. Most urban public plazas would have more pigeons. Smoking seems to be allowed, or at least its ban is not enforced. There is nothing for sale. That alone distinguishes this place.

People walk around, sit on hard stone benches, or linger in the odd gravity along the edges of the two rectilinear pools. The pools are sunk deep into the earth and memorialize, if not sanctify, the footprints of the two vanished towers. The voids are smaller than the buildings along each side but are said to be precisely aligned with the former twin towers.

These metaphoric open areas are surrounded by a broad bronze railing. It carries the names of the dead while protecting the living from the precipice. Each letter of each person's name has been cut through the thick metal band. The names in most memorials are chiseled into stone or raised in cast metal. Here, the letters have been fully cut away, probably with a laser or water jet cutter. What remains is a stencil—nothing but an outline. The use of negative space is effective; the emptiness tells the story. The people are gone. The buildings are gone.

After a while, I was ready to go. Perhaps I'd had enough of the memorial's energy, though I had not gotten my fill of the place itself.

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