

[Op-Ed on opening of 9/11 Memorial from “The America Prospect” Magazine]

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# Lost in Space

Is it really possible to memorialize 9/11 in the heart of New York's financial district?

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**SEPTEMBER 12, 2011**

The widely anticipated National 9/11 Memorial, "Reflecting Absence," opens to the public today, finalizing the decade-long argument about how to honor an event with which the country is still coming to terms. Committing the past to two cavernous voids, the memorial spreads horizontally over eight of the 16 acres of the World Trade Center, dipping underground into reflecting pools constructed in the footprints of the twin towers. The outside area, which opened yesterday to the families of victims, features what the site's designer, Michael Arad, has called a "living park" of swamp white oak trees whose rows are interrupted by the negative space of the tower imprints.

As evidenced by the hum of heavy machinery and continued presence of fences, much of the site, like the underground museum that will open a year from now, remains under construction. Architect Daniel Libeskind's overall plan includes five new skyscrapers rounded off by the design firm Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill's 1,776-foot-tall "Freedom Tower," which has already risen 83 floors and is scheduled for completion next year. Solemn as the memorial is intended to be, the grounds will ultimately give way to a skyline reclaimed by office towers that act as a spatial counterpart to Arad's memorial. If the earthbound structure reflects absence,

Libeskind's plan for the remaining eight acres is devoted to filling it. The inevitable return of the World Trade Center as a location for commerce and tourism elicits the question: Can a sacred mourning area survive in the heart of the marketplace?

Taken alone, the layout of the memorial accomplishes what Arad's proposal set out to do, capturing the sense of loss occasioned by the attacks and preserving a space for reflection. The most brilliant part of the design is that individual reactions are neither prescribed nor prevented. Visitors approach the two footprints -- representations of a grief that can never be fully assimilated -- and fill the emptiness in any way they imagine. The names of the dead, inscribed in bronze along the edges of the waterfalls, invoke the missing bodies they represent. The lack of religious iconography and symbolism, which in many other memorials dictates how one mourns, allows universal participation. The space can induce religious prayer, secular remembrance, anger, bereavement, or acceptance. It can foster moments of private thought or initiate public engagement. One can make of absence what ones likes.

But this universality is precisely what threatens the memorial as a sacred space for reflection. The problem with the central theme is that absence is too easily filled with unexpected objects and ideas; it's a blank slate onto which we impose whatever narrative we like, and in the case of the World Trade Center, it's a narrative that slips into jingoism and easily packaged slogans. When Mayor Michael Bloomberg suggested, in a speech to kick off 9/11 Anniversary week, that "the rebirth and revitalization of Lower Manhattan will be remembered as one of the greatest comeback stories in American history," he unwittingly promoted the site as a future object of Hollywood nostalgia. Twisted into a banal narrative of overcoming, absence turns into grief's empty slogan.

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*Slidehow: National 9/11 Memorial*

As the rest of the site moves toward completion, the space where spectators mournfully reflect risks being subsumed into a story not of loss but of honor, triumphalism, and freedom. Though

the Freedom Tower was officially renamed World Trade Center One two years ago at the behest of the Port Authority, the name has stuck, harkening back to the moment when we consumed Freedom Fries and Freedom Toast and accused critics of military force of "hating freedom." The awkwardly tall aerial that will extend the building's height to a symbolic 1,776 feet is as forced architecturally as it is symbolically, recasting the events of September 11, 2001, in the mold of our Declaration of Independence from Britain. The completion of the surrounding towers will restore the rentable office space lost in the attacks, and while each tower's design description emphasizes its capacity to elicit hope, dignity, and renewal, it is, at heart, some of the most financially viable mourning space in the world. It seems fortuitous that reflection also happens to be the primary characteristic of today's glass office buildings.

Of course, it is naive to think that a memorial to the September 11 attacks would somehow transcend the profit motive. The decision to rebuild was made not only as a consolatory gesture to healing, but also out of an impulse to recuperate one of the most valuable tracts of commercial real estate in the country.

The commercialization isn't limited to the return to business as usual; it extends to the ways in which 9/11 has been commodified, packaged, and sold to consumers since it occurred. In a recent article for *Slate*, Luke O'Brien wrote about the persistent use of 9/11 images for commercial purposes and details how street vendors selling souvenirs and books outside the site have established a "gray market of Ground Zero memorabilia" that feeds off of tourism. Indeed, exploited grief provides countless opportunities to disseminate tchotchkes and is no less prevalent in the memorial gift shop, which online already offers apparel, books, DVDs, key chains, keepsake boxes, bracelets in rubber or silver, and metal pins that undoubtedly take their inspiration from the American flags gracing the lapels of politicians.

While purchasing these objects contributes to a sense of national belonging and helps to offset the cost of the memorial's annual operating budget, there is something disquieting about the ways in which support has aligned with commercial sponsorship. For instance, the "Signs of Support" campaign tasks local businesses to donate to the memorial in exchange for homogenous memorial decals that appear next to Zagat ratings and opening hours -- it's the sanctity of grief, brought to you by AT&T.

The thing about absence is that, like the ideal consumer, it can never be fully satisfied. Arad's reflecting pools, drained and endlessly replenished by waterfalls, attempts to testify to the continual presence of loss. Paradoxically, empty space in this case has been packed with a misleading patriotic message about American independence, abstract talk of freedom, and the enduring truth that people will buy anything.

Ten years ago, in the landscape of our newly "post-9/11" world, commemorative practice survived to communicate a clear message: Memory, Now. In the immediate moment of the disaster we looked to the future, asking: How will this be remembered and represented? This Sunday marked a decade of continual planning, reconsideration, and reconstruction of a city space whose overall design took a mere 18 months to conceive and select. But the problem with memory is that it demands time, the wide-angle view of retrospection. Understanding what it means to commit something to historical memory is difficult for people to do at the moment of historical impact.

The focus on absence registers the disorder and bewilderment initiated by an event whose meaning might never be clear, even in the fullness of time. Perhaps the reason that the event was always destined to be commodified is that it was conceived of as a product at the moment of its occurrence. September 11, 2001, was a day of pre-emptive nostalgia in which discussion of the event was already intertwined with thoughts of how we would be discussing it tomorrow. Standing at Ground Zero, we thought immediately of the truisms that typically help us register the meaning of loss: how heroes die so their countrymen can be free, how brave citizens keep calm and carry on, how the United States of America only gains strength from adversity.