

## Remembering September 11th

A fitting tribute



The National September 11 Memorial Museum opens on May 21st. Two tridents, steel supports from the original World Trade Centre, can be seen inside the museum. JEFF GOLDBERG

IN THE days and weeks after the attacks on September 11th 2001, impromptu memorials were erected all over the city and surrounding suburbs for the nearly 3,000 killed. Missing posters, with personal details and heartbreaking photographs, were plastered everywhere. People began to leave candles and flowers near them. Days after the attacks, around 2,000 people gathered for a candlelight vigil outside the Queens firehouse near where I live. Nineteen firefighters from the house—Squad 288 and Hazmat 1—were “missing”. Until that week, that corner had a perfect view of the World Trade Centre’s towers. Suddenly they were gone, leaving a hole in the city skyline. Strangers hugged each other. Some silently cried. The owner of the local Chinese takeaway said aloud, but to himself, “I just delivered to them”. Someone had written “288” in candles on the pavement.

In the months and years since then, more permanent memorials were built in the city’s various neighbourhoods and surrounding suburbs. In September 2011, ten years after the attacks, the official memorial, called “Reflecting Absence” finally opened. Its main features include two pools in the footprints of the fallen towers. The names of the dead are inscribed in bronze plates on surrounding walls. At first glance the names appear jumbled, but people who worked together and died together are grouped together. The effect is moving. Nearby stands a pear tree that was originally planted in the WTC plaza in the 1970s. It was found in the rubble, nursed back to health and returned to the site. The new World Trade Centre, after years of

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construction delays and political paralysis, is slated to be completed later this year. And the National September 11 Memorial Museum, on Liberty Street, will open on May 21st.

Michael Bloomberg, who became mayor of New York in January 2002, while the city was still in shock, was instrumental in getting the museum built. He spoke at the opening ceremony yesterday. "In the years to come, the 9/11 Memorial Museum will take its place alongside the fields of Gettysburg, the waters of Pearl Harbor and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a sacred marker of our past and as a solemn gathering place." This was not hyperbole. Built within the archaeological core of the original World Trade Centre site, the museum is indeed a sacred spot, where thousands of people died and the remains of the unidentified are stored. Visiting this place is gut-wrenching.

The museum's glass and metal building was designed by Snøhetta, an architectural firm based in Oslo and New York. "The pools and the memorial ground are about the past and the events that have occurred in the past, and they memorialise that event. The skyscrapers are about trust in the future," says Craig Dykers one of the principal architects. "Our building is about the present in time, this moment now." The building's mirror-like exterior reflects both visitors and the new World Trade Centre as it reaches into the sky.

The building also evokes the past. The lines on its façade recall those of the long-gone towers. The web-like supports recall the steel remnants of the towers that littered the ground-zero site long after they fell. The pavilion, or atrium, is bright and calming—a place to reflect before entering the museum, or collect oneself afterwards. A soothingly bland "family room" is available for mourning families to sit on couches and grieve, or post notes and pictures on walls made of cork.

The main museum is immense, some 110,000 square feet in a cavernous underground space, designed by Davis Brody Bond. The exhibition tells the story of what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup> and afterwards, the trauma and recovery, through multi-media displays, archives, audio and video narratives and artefacts. The lives of all the victims from both the 2001 and 1993 attacks are commemorated.

Two tridents, salvaged steel supports from one of the towers, stand alongside the stairs, near the glass façade. The wood floors darken and a ramp leads visitors down six storeys, towards the bedrock of the city. Every so often the snaking ramp opens so visitors can see below to a 70 foot (21 metre) slurry wall. This underground wall mercifully held back the Hudson River during the attacks. It has since been reinforced. The WTC's exposed column foundations are a stark reminder of just how immense the towers were.

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Throughout the space are segments of twisted steel, like sculptures. A fire engine from the back looks a bit battered, but the entire front cab is a ghost of mangled steel. A set of partially damaged concrete stairs nestle between an escalator and the museum's main staircase. The so-called "Survivors' Staircase" was an outdoor staircase that led some survivors to safety on nearby Vesey Street. In removing this staircase from the site, architects and archeologists treated it as carefully as an ancient relic.

The 10,000 artefacts each tell a tale. Dust-covered shoes are encased in glass. Florence Jones, who spoke at the opening ceremony, donated the shoes she wore that day to the museum. She was one of the last 25 people to come out of the South Tower. She took off her shoes as she walked down the 77 storeys. She then walked barefoot 60 blocks. A red bandana tells the tale of Welles Crowther, a 24-year old who worked in one of the towers. In his spare time, he worked as a volunteer firefighter. While wearing a red bandana to shield himself from the smoke, he led people to safety down the stairs. He was last seen going back up the smoky stairs to help others escape. The many personal items, donated by family members, like wallets and credit cards, pack a punch. They survived while their owners did not. Now they are in a museum.

The audio and video clips of those who are lost, of those who remain, of construction workers, of firefighters, of ordinary New Yorkers, are very moving. The personal accounts, such as the one from John Napolitano whose firefighting son died that day, are hard to listen to. The last phone calls of those lost are devastating. The multi-media exhibits, designed by Local Projects, are particularly moving. In some places visitors are encouraged to make videos while at the museum, which will become part of the exhibit.

The museum is extremely well done. It offers solace to those who still mourn, and an education for those who were not yet born. There are missteps. Some exhibits, though well meaning, feel unnecessary, such as the many commemorative quilts or a motorcycle that had been owned by a fireman who died that day (his friends restored it in his name). Nor is the museum without controversy. Some Muslims worry that the al-Qaeda video links Islam with terrorism. The entry fee, at \$24, is pricy. Mr Bloomberg, who chairs the museum, hopes one day museum will be free, like many other national parks and landmarks. Congress has so far been tight with funding.

An artwork by Spencer Finch, called "Trying to Remember the Colour of the Sky on That September Morning", spans a wall of the museum. It is powerful. Most New Yorkers remember that the sky was so blue that terrible day. The wall is covered in what looks to be a blue mosaic tile, but is actually blue paper. A quote from Virgil's "Aeneid" stretches across it: "No day shall erase you from the memory of time".